

Black Oceans

Jacek Dukaj

I

From The Country and The World

THE Alps stood over everything, huge, cold, silent. The policemen walking around the estate looked back at them from time to time, because the contrast was too horrible. They found the first bodies by the stream. Five people knelt on the bank, in a straight row, bent low, as if trying to reach the water with their mouths, and then someone blew their heads off. They were shot from behind, in the back of the head, almost vertically, with a pump gun. The police were notified by holidaymakers from the cottage below when they noticed shreds of brain floating in the stream, an eyeball bobbing in the waves. The estate was listed in the register of sects, and the police appeared immediately in great force, bringing in two teams for an A-V scan. They were now walking around the pastures, checking the interior and surroundings of the wooden villa. A large tin bucket full of severed fingers stood on the veranda. After emptying it, they found someone's head at the bottom. So far, they had not found the rest of the body that matched it. The basement contained twelve fingerless children, including infants. Kevorkian injections, the coroner had ruled. Upstairs was a temple. Long, yellow-brown snakes of intestines hung in heavy garlands from the chandelier, ran in steep arcs along the ceiling to furniture, windows, and door frames—anatomical Gothic. The policemen entered with umbrellas, blood dripping constantly—a constant pap-pap-pap-pap-pap-pap on the monocloth. The guru, and he was the last one, sat in the lotus position on a tatami mat right under a chandelier. He was kept in that position posthumously by a horse-dose of Phidias. The guru (who was forty-seven and had been a science fiction writer before his epiphany) had gouged out his own eyes and cut off his fingers

with a vibrating knife held in a vise. When the door to the room was opened, the speakers were turned on and his deep, charismatic voice flowed out, reciting the *Book of the Non-Body*, written by himself: "As for spirit, so for matter. The body is a prison, the body is a stone of form, a mask and a film over the eyes. Through it, as through stairs, you will climb to immortality." It took a moment to find all the speakers and turn them off. Meanwhile, the guru was saying: "Listen, listen, listen: I am infecting you." The police moved through this horror slowly, carefully, considering every step, always letting the scanners, who were blinded by the recording, go first. You entered the interior of this house as if into a caisson with a low oxygen content —after a few minutes you had to go back outside, look at the Alps, smoke a cigarette, even a nicotine cigarette (here in Switzerland, they were still legal). Otherwise, the mind would sink into a swamp of wild associations, clouds of depression would gather over it, shortness of breath and nausea would overwhelm the person. So they stood under the veranda, breathing the mountain air and exchanging comments in hushed tones. "Jaty like Barkers'." "Bloody fucks." "I give up, I don't even try to understand it anymore." "What a sick mind..." "And shot them all." "You see, they shot themselves."

The white snow of the Alps burned their eyes, they blinked the stinging tears welling up in them.

AT night it looks like a fire in an amusement park. Through the window of the plane descending for landing (Flight no. 4582 from Atlanta, second transfer), Black looked at New York under the phosphorescent blanket of the city of airships, gently swaying in the Atlantic wind. The glow of gigantic advertisements and the lights of apartments suspended from hot-air whales anchored on glass ropes —marked a map of prosperity in the sky. It was a circle within a circle: the high luxury of the city center surrounded by the zone of last century's luxury, itself surrounded in turn by endless suburbs. As they flew over them, he saw cold reflections of light in countless home swimming pools.

In the distance, broadband lasers flashed classic advertising holographs, from this distance, and especially from this angle —were completely illegible. However, from the combination of colors, one could deduce the affiliation of the logo.

The plane descended into La Guardia in a strange spiral, every now and then another part of the metropolis blazed with bright colors behind the porthole.

Cold despair flooded the Black's mind, even though he turned his head away from the viewing screens. People are there, millions of people. I'll drown. A tsunami of blackness. Who will save me when I'm alone in a crowd of thousands? Jesus Christ.

The passenger from a women's compartment was mentally masturbating, the businessman from the front seat was humiliating himself with the memory of his boss's contempt, the baby in his mother's arms was dreaming of anal pleasures, and the mother, with cold hatred for herself, was reproaching herself for the weak will that had prevented her hand from falling on the incubus' TERMINATE; and the steward was dreaming of a terrorist attack, the blood of passengers on the ceiling.

Black had difficulty holding back sobs. Someone's stomach must have been hurting here, because Black's was literally churning, he was cowering despite the seat belts. He tried to focus on the goal, on the necessity —but they all had fathers too and the image blurred, love, hatred and indifference distorted memories, including the ones of excess. The steward became worried, he wanted to approach, ask —so Black straightened up, smoothed his face.

When they landed, he waited until everyone had left and stood up last. The white sleeve was like an umbilical cord connecting the fuselage of the machine with the Mother Crowd. He walked forward, mortally terrified. Thick blackness was blowing into his face. He looked at the ticket to remember his name; he immediately lost the thought of the reason for looking. He stopped several times. His legs hurt terribly. Behind the gate, he was overcome with bureaucratic frustration, he shouted at the customs officer in a borrowed language. All in all, he was so disoriented and stunned that he would not stand a chance against even the biggest idiot.

They —they had already developed the optimal procedure in terms of safety and approached with great caution. When Black collected his luggage and headed for the exit, the sniper seated in the gallery on the other side of the hall received a description and location of the target over a phone hidden in his earlobe, because until then he had no idea who it was.

He was instructed to fire a shot within five seconds at the latest. He fired in four.

The poisoned needle hit Black in the neck. He moved his shoulders instinc-

tively. He looked back, surprised.

Seven other men, mingling with the crowd of travelers, now received their orders —the same way as the sniper, just as concise. Having located the target, they ran toward it. Black was already bending at the knees. They grabbed him under the arms, surrounded him with a ring of bodies. The seventh picked up the dropped luggage.

Limousines were waiting on the street. The unconscious Black was loaded into the second one.

A bald pheno-asian sitting next to the driver gave his phone the password.

"Tell Hunt it's done," he said. "Have them get the shuttle ready."

THE heart rate dropped, the eye movements suggested REM phase —although the Number was not asleep. The supervising doctor on duty ordered the computer to inject a stimulating dose of hormones. After the injection, the offender shuddered several times, opened his mouth, and moaned. With unconscious jerks (and it looked as if a dead piece of meat was thrashing under the shocks of electricity) he tried to break free, but the belts held tight. Droplets of saliva broke off from his gums and drifted through the air toward the nearest opening of the atmosphere exchanger.

Suddenly the alphas began to go crazy, the program analyzing brain function beeped an alarm, inside and outside the on-duty medic's A-blind.

"Cut him off!" Preslawny shouted on the company line. The doctor looked at the virtual graphs and his hair stood on end. "I'll have to flatten him! Osfan has already gone triple!"

"Wait!"

The man in the room visible on the LEDwall had stopped moving on the bed he was strapped to. Everything in him was fading away, dying: his brain, his lungs, his heart. It was visible on the screen, and the doctor saw it even more clearly. The patient was falling into a deep coma. Even his temperature had moved, although only by a few hundredths.

Preslawny entered the duty room, still wiping ketchup from his lips.

"He's collapsing," he muttered after barely glancing. "How hard can you shock?"

"We lost the Third to fibrillation, defibrillation —grave."

"But he's fucking collapsing. Full syringe!" The doctor gave an order in OVR.

"Oh my God..." the patient moaned quietly, all the more poignantly because it was completely unexpected: usually they didn't say anything. The loudspeakers transmitted this groan to the observation room, multiplied in decibels and boosted by a dark bass. Preslawny shuddered and immediately became furious with himself for that shiver, a compromising signal from a weakling soul.

"What, do you see the light at the end of the tunnel yet?" he gritted.

"Look at the EEG."

Preslawny looked and collapsed helplessly into the chair.

He wanted to grab his head, but his hands realized the banality and dropped them in mid-gesture.

"The Fourth" he sighed, and that was the epitaph for the catatonic on the screen.

"We should inform Mr. Hunt," the doctor, emerging from his half-blindness, observed in a dispassionate voice.

"Yeah."

IN Boston, Dr. Vassone (a tenured professor at Boston University) was finishing breakfast in a hotel restaurant. The journalist she had arranged to interview here had already left the table, fed up with the standard package of lies about exaggerated rumors and absurd (here, winking) commitments signed in connection with government grants: CNS and CAS, where she lectured, were financed only a few percent from private sources. She could now devote her full attention to the cooling food.

The waiter and a businessman writing on an LEDpad two tables away saw everything very clearly and later gave exhaustive testimony.

Dr. Vassone dropped her cup, there was a sharp rattle —and that was when they looked at her.

She blinked rapidly, tears streaming from her eyes. She bit her lower lip so hard that small drops of blood appeared on it. She began to crumple the tablecloth with her hands, pulling it toward her; the tableware clattered. Vassone sighed loudly. She jerked her head, the pendant with the juridicator's logo hit her chin. The expression on her face changed from fear, through suffering, to the deepest despair. She sobbed from the depths of her chest. She raised her right hand and stretched it forward, but the movement lacked decisiveness and the fingers did not reach the target, whatever it was. They immediately turned back and, bent into claws, struck Vassone's cheek. The nails dug into her skin. Groaning, she began to scratch her face.

At that moment the waiter reacted. He ran up to Vassone and grabbed her wrists. She struggled. Calling for a doctor, the businessman went to help the waiter.

Together, they finally overpowered the woman —but that's what it looked like: a brutal submission. There was no way to avoid a loud scuffle, throwing all the tableware to the floor, destroying the men's jackets and Vassone's shirt. She scratched blindly, on herself and on them. The wide, bloody furrows gave her face a ghastly resemblance to Indian war paintings.

"What, what, what's going on...?" the businessman whispered to her.

"My children, my children" she moaned, trembling in their hands. Such sorrow, such despair sounded in that moan that both of them involuntarily looked around the room for some children, but there were none at that moment.

"What?"

"I killed them, I killed them, my God, I killed them both..."

More hotel staff appeared, including the hotel doctor —they took her from the main room to the back. She cried loudly as they dragged her. Other guests (though there weren't many of them here at that hour) exchanged comments in half-whispers. The entire hotel was covered in NETi and, commenting on the

event, they instinctively looked around for hidden cameras.

The ambulance arrived and Dr. Vassone was taken to the hospital (they didn't know her medic code, she didn't have a medallion on her cashchip). The paramedics forced her into a straitjacket, even though she had stopped struggling. They dressed the wounds on her face. She also had several broken fingernails and skin peeled off her forearms. They watched her closely.

Marina Vassone, meticulously sculpted, despite her forty-seven years retained the figure of a model, her complexion unwrinkled, her eyes like a teenager's—pale blue, very cold. Short white hair combed back. Definitely a Scandinavian type of beauty.

At first, she whispered something to herself in a foreign language. Then she calmed down, took a few deep breaths and spoke to the paramedic in English. She repeated the same phone number over and over, persuading, threatening and begging him to call it immediately. Ask for Mr. Hunt. It's important. Let him move his ass. But the medic was surfing the waves of music flowing from the resonators implanted under his skull: with a condescending smile he ignored the woman in the straitjacket.

At the hospital they took out her DNAM, contacted the local medical examiner's office, did tests, gave her a few shots and put her back in the ward, strapped to the bed with very wide belts. Here it hit her again. Despite the chemical suppression she started screaming that she was a murderess, that they should send her to the electric chair, that she would burn in hell and things like that.

The dose was doubled. She fell asleep.

The notified (geographically) closest family turned out to be a seventeen-year-old son. True, he was no longer a son in the legal sense, because Vassone's parenting contract had expired six years ago and within the context of the Giddenson's Family Code, nothing connected them any more; nevertheless, the data remained in the registers.

He arrived, patiently watching over her, and was there when she woke up. She immediately recited the number. Call, call, call.

He called.

"Can I speak to Mr. Hunt?"

A woman or a secretarial program using a female dialectant answered.

"Who is this?"

"Jason Vassone, I'm calling on behalf of my mother, it's urgent, she asked me to..."

"Where did you get this number?"

"Well, I'm telling you, my mother, Dr. Marina S. Vassone, do you hear, or should I spell it, she's in the hospital and asked me to..."

A shift occurred on the other side.

"This is Hunt. What happened?"

"They're keeping her in the hospital, in the psychiatric ward, she asked..."

"Which hospital is it?"

Half an hour after this conversation, two civilians arrived, looking like soldiers who had been disguised at the last minute. They immediately got into an argument with the staff. The hospital lawyers and a medic were called in. The guards from nearby posts didn't take their hands off their holsters.

Jason watched all this from the threshold of his mother's ward, unsure whether it wouldn't be better to hide from the others' gaze. Childhood fears took over: maybe they'll come and forbid him, maybe they'll chase him away.

When she looked a little more convalescent, he approached and leaned over her.

"What happened, Mom? Are you really sick?"

"She got me," she whispered, moistening her lips. "You'd better leave now."

"But..."

"Please. No, I'm not sick. Go now."

He didn't go.

Meanwhile, the two gloomy civilians had apparently reached some kind of agreement with the hospital authorities.

They had taken up the post Jason had abandoned: the doorway to the ward.

"Now we have to wait," one of them announced. "If only they'd hurry up."

"Who?" Jason asked. "Who are you?" The other man smiled.

"What, don't you watch movies? We're part of that government conspiracy that was behind Roswell, the Kennedy assassination, and environmental pollution. Don't you recognize the suits?"

"But can I stay?"

"What, is someone kicking you out?"

They lit cigarettes. They stood against the wall and watched. Dr. Vassone was muttering her multiplication table back and forth, seven times eight, seven times nine, seven times ten. Suddenly, one of the other patients began to scream in Spanish that he was damned and that the Devil was waiting for him. A nurse came in, changed the program on his dispenser; he soon calmed down.

The two men in suits watched dispassionately.

After more than three hours, those for whom the pseudo-civilians were waiting had arrived. Jason's jaw dropped. They were seven Buddhist monks, with shaved skulls, in long brown and orange robes, sandals, and some kind of prayer implements in their hands. They sat around Dr. Vassone's bed, then closed their eyes, became still, almost stopped breathing.

"Okay," one of the agents muttered, stubbing out his cigarette. "They're meditating. Notify Hunt," he threw it at his partner.

"Who are they?" Jason huffed. "What's this all about?"

"Don't worry about it," the other patted him on the shoulder, raising his hand with the phone to his lips. "They're guards. Your mother is safe now."

MCFLY and his crew had been camping in this house for three days now.

The building had been abandoned for over ten years and had turned into a gloomy ruin during that time. It stood at the very end of town, beyond that there was only a meadow, a road and a vast scrapyard, from which the wind brought the bloody smell of rust in the evenings.

McFly's crew consisted of two men and a woman. The woman had been recruited through advertisements on an occult website. She called herself "Madame Florence." In reality, she was the unsculpted daughter of an Alabama alcoholic, barely out of high school, and knew maybe twenty French phrases, which she mercilessly mutilated with her wooden accent. Behind her back, they called her Klemp. She slept upstairs, they slept downstairs: it was upstairs where all the murders were committed.

Harcott, who was in fact an army doctor, was responsible for the equipment: the electronic cap that Madame Florence was required to wear twenty-four hours a day, and two suitcases full of computers and their peripherals. McFly, *de facto* team leader, a "civilian" lieutenant in the US Navy (naval counterintelligence), maintained contact with Hunt's Team and took care of the so-called "security" of the area, and although he didn't have much to do, he was also given Vace to help him. Vace went downtown to do his shopping. All three were slim, well-built, two-meter-tall blondes with gray eyes: their conception coincided with the period of Frank di Mozza's greatest popularity.

Madame Florence slept like a log the first night, Harcott, watching over her, almost fell asleep himself: all regular graphs, data in the middle of intervals, nothing exceptional. The first deviations appeared on the second night. Then, in the morning, while Harcott was asleep, McFly recorded an account of Madame Florence's dreams: something about the sea, and shapes in the dark, and impersonal fear, and a room from which one could not escape. Then, in accordance with the instructions, he had her read a summary of the history of this house and its inhabitants, and their crimes, prepared by one of the departments of Hunt's Team. In the Team's jargon, reading such works —and especially studying the attached photographs —was called "rubbing the connections."

At night, after their "rubbing," there was contact.

McFly was awakened by a squeak in his ear. Alarm. Vace was already getting up too. The instructions forbade possession of any weapons during the operation: they didn't even have knives.

“Harcott, Harcott!” McFly whispered into the Nokia’s signal microphone. “Report, damn it! What’s going on there?”

But silence. McFly waved at Vace. Stairs. The interior of the building was drowned in darkness. They put on night-vision goggles. The rough monochrome lit up. The floor creaked on the first floor. Footsteps? Whose? They listened for a moment. From outside the building came the low noise of the rising storm, the rattle of garbage being thrown across the yard. More crackling.

McFly waved toward the stairs. They set off in jumps, mutually insuring themselves —due to the lack of firearms, at a very close distance. Vermin fled from under their feet. No one in the hall. Rain blew through the shattered stained glass above the door: the smell of night, the smell of storm, ozone on the bales of cold air. McFly showed: me first.

He climbed right next to the balustrade, not leaning on the railing. Despite everything, a few steps groaned under him and Vace. The corridor upstairs was also quiet. Madame Florence’s bedroom door was ajar, darkness behind it. They began to listen for breathing, murmurs of movement —but the storm drowned everything out.

McFly signed again: me. He jumped to the door, crouched, looked in. Blood flooded his eyes, the impact knocked him onto his back, his glasses fell off. The cut across half of his head stung like hell. He tried to roll to the side, simultaneously feeling his skull, but in shock he mixed up the sides and rolled under Vace’s feet. Vace wanted to jump over him —he hit the door pushed open by Madame Florence. She fell out with a crooked tooth of broken glass in her hand, McFly’s blood dripping from the glass.

“Drop it!” shouted Vace, jumping back.

“What’s happening, what’s happening...?!” McFly asked desperately, wiping his redglasses with his sleeve. “Drop it!”

But Madame Florence only raised the glass knife higher. The cap with electrodes was askew on her head, her hair was sticking out of in all directions. There were stains on her face and on her dressing gown, which Vace saw through the night vision as blotches of deep black, but he knew what they really were.

“Harcott...?! Harcott, for God’s sake...?!”

The doctor didn’t answer.

Klemp threw herself at Vace, the lieutenant jumped away.

Meanwhile, McFly got to his feet. With his left hand, he wiped and shook the blood from his forehead, with his right, he signaled Vace from behind Madame Florence: I’ll catch her from behind. One, two, three.

They jumped at the same time. At that moment, lightning struck somewhere very close, McFly was blinded, he fell into Vace. Klemp howled, waving the glass. Vace grabbed his stomach. McFly took a few steps back with his eyes squeezed shut. He was already starting to feel dizzy from the loss of blood.

“Down, Vace, call for help!”

“Jeeeeessuuss, she ripped me open...”

“Vace!”

McFly lifted his eyelids. Madame Florence was running at him with the raised tooth of dirty glass, her mouth twisted in some wild grimace, her eyes bulging. McFly hit her in the larynx with the edge of his foot, adjusted his knee, grabbed her right hand, broke it, knocked the piece of glass out of her hand. He laid the unconscious woman on the floor. Then he had to lean against the wall, his vision was blurry. Someone was crying. McFly headed back up the stairs. There, by the bedroom door, lay Vace with his intestines exposed. He held them in his hands, shaking terribly, tears streaming from his eyes. McFly looked into the bedroom. Harcott’s severed head lay on the pillow. MacFly’s legs buckled, he knelt down next to Vace, who was already starting to lose his breath. He mechanically stroked his face.

“My God, what is this, what’s going on here, what horror for a poor...”

OF course, it was not a shuttle in the last century’s sense of the word —although it fulfilled the same function —but simply an orbital plane permanently adapted to high-altitude routes, well above the altitude necessary to hover above the rotating globe during ordinary transcontinental passenger flights. For

an hour it had been preparing for takeoff on the runway adjacent to the one now occupied by the Boeing that had flown Black.

They drove the limousines right up to the steps, loaded Black into the rear cabin, strapped him into a seat.

A suitably trained medic flew with him. His name was Timothy Flowers. He already had some experience in this job. In fact, he had been serving this route from the very beginning.

Shaking his head, he read the order, as always extremely concise. On the same flight, the "JFK" would take Number Four back down. Apparently, he didn't last long either.

After checking the condition of the only other passenger (the man was unconscious), Flowers sat down in his seat with a sigh.

Black woke up a few minutes after takeoff. There was no need to stuff him with sleeping pills now, and Flowers hadn't read such a recommendation in the order. He knew the procedure and was used to it, so he just checked Black's pulse and looked into his eyes. He knew he didn't have to explain anything.

"What happened to the Fourth" Black asked him.

"I don't know" Flowers replied. There was no order to keep the secret from those being carried. "Some kind of coma. Always the same. We're bringing him back to New York."

"Happy birthday, Tim."

"Thank you."

"Can you give me something to gargle?"

"Of course."

"Please."

Black's hands were attached to the armrests of the chair with Velcro, but the container of orange juice that Flowers had handed him hung obligingly in front of his face. They were already in orbit.

Flowers watched the patient out of the corner of his eye (they were sitting in chairs on either side of the aisle, behind the partition separating the pilots' cabin). Sculpted, unsculpted, Flowers couldn't decide. Usually they were obviously unsculpted, usually absolutely calm. Like this one: he said nothing, did nothing, until they docked at Lab 13.

Because others were saying, doing —and to some extent even thinking —for him; as always. Timothy Flowers, who was supposed to look after him, fulfilled his task by his very presence.

Number Five, Number Five —that's how Flowers saw him, that's how he labeled him. Black automatically began to see himself that way too: the fifth in a row to be sent to the orbital hermitage, to be executed, to a coma, to the death of the mind. He also saw himself as an anonymous passenger, human cargo —in the eyes of the pair of the "JFK's" pilots. There was some small confusion in their surrounding associations: originally they were supposed to deliver him to Lab 9, then the destination was suddenly changed. Black easily connected the data from the associations circulating in the heads of the pilots and the medic: it was because of the sudden collapse of Number Four. Lab 13 was being vacated, and they would install him there immediately. (Thirteen, the ill-fated number).

They kidnapped him, shot him into space, left him alone in a tin can surrounded by the deadly vacuum —was he afraid? But all these were the intentions and actions of people, no natural disaster, no malice of nature. How could one be afraid of people? Despair —yes; black depression —most certainly; but —fear? In fact, Black was never moved by delicate amazement, it was a kind of petty curiosity: he would look here, look there, wait, think... He liked to be surprised.

After docking and equalizing the pressure, Flowers unfastened himself and swam to the hatch of Lab 13. Black watched the interior of the habitat through his eyes, watched Number Four, who was in a coma. In appearance —an average savage.

Flowers very carefully unfastened all the medical equipment that had been wrapped around him, pulled the needles out of his veins, tore off the bandages.

Number Four —Black concluded —had to put all of this on himself, had to wrap his body with that instrumentation of remote torture himself. After all, there was no one else here.

An average man. Asleep? Not even that. The silence of the calm sea emanates from him, the murmur of waves: small and slow like a summer breeze on a lake. He is gone, he is not here.

Flowers dragged the limp body to the middle cabin of the plane. Four's legs were tied, his hands were attached to his torso, the medic was operating the unconscious man's body like a plastic doll. He sat him down, secured him, and connected him to the plane's sensors.

Then he returned to Black. He took out and loaded the injector. Black was still attached to the seat with elastic straps.

"Just procedure," Flowers muttered to him, rather thoughtlessly, because this was certainly not an attempt to justify himself. "You could thrash around, and here everything is delicate, it's better not to risk a brawl in zero G. You'll fall asleep in a moment, I'll transfer you to the lab calmly."

"I know."

Flowers unlatched the injector, looked Black briefly in the eye.

"I know you know. You always know."

Nicholas Hunt

NICHOLAS HUNT strolled through the hanging gardens above New York. The gardens swayed gently with the airship they were suspended from, unaccustomed visitors to the skyhouses often fell ill with a kind of seasickness during strong winds, and jokes were told about people vomiting over the railings onto the city below. Hunt was one of those who were already accustomed. True, he didn't live in those sky-high enclaves of superluxury himself, but he was a frequent enough guest here to acclimate his body to the characteristic disorientation of the labyrinth.

The senator's gardens (on the second sublevel of his airship) covered an area of almost one and a half square kilometers. They were mostly tropical plants, with many vines hiding the numerous mechanisms and supporting pillars of the platform. During the day, systems of fiber-optic prisms, twenty meters above, tightly covering the entire ceiling of the sublevel, lit artificial suns in the gardens. The night, however, was real.

That ceiling was also the floor of the first sublevel, where the senator's apartments and offices were located, and where a celebration was now underway to celebrate the passage of the Unintentional Intellectual Products Protection Act he had promoted.

The Honorable Gaspar R. Tito, self-proclaimed tribune of the people of New York State; brother-in-law of Nicholas Hunt. The iron chains of associations and reflexes made Hunt's lips twist slightly at the mere thought of the senator. In truth, they neither liked nor hated each other. A few mutual favors on the basis of a business transaction. At Gaspar's, one met important people, made

valuable acquaintances; rather than a showbiz star, you could have bumped into a mysterious multi-billionaire here, whose name has never appeared on the pages of *Forbes*.

Nevertheless, Hunt would not have come if not for his sister's insistence. Do, do me this pleasure. So he did. He had always liked Imelda; now he respected her too. Five years ago, when their career vectors had taken exactly opposite turns to their current ones, he had begged his sister's company at one of the semi-official receptions in the capital. At that time, he had still held the scepter of True Power. In the days before his expulsion from paradise, two of his glances had been enough to arouse universal interest in such a distinguished person. It was no wonder that Imelda intrigued Tito. If you look at the matter from this angle, he had only himself to blame for the marriage contract. But was he really dissatisfied with a senator in the family?

At times it seemed to him that by thinking in this way he was only scratching old wounds. More often, however, he suspected himself of subconscious perfidy (oh, he delighted in such suspicions!). That he had supposedly planned this affinity as a safeguard for just such an occasion, when fiery angels would replace the entrance to the Garden and there would be no escape from the land of sweat and mud. That for such an eventuality he would at least have a substitute: Senator Tito's gardens. He delighted in such suspicions, he longed for such a self, he liked to imagine such a self.

Meanwhile, in the absence of genuine scum, he only made evil grimaces in Senator Tito's absence.

It was in his gardens that Nicholas received a call from Jason Vassone. Hunt had fled the party after only fifteen minutes: this was one of those cases when he physically felt the ambition consuming him. The position —not only provincial (because provincial is everything that lies outside the Washington beltway), but also secret. How was he supposed to present himself to them now? He still couldn't find his way. They looked and didn't see, they looked and didn't envy him.

So he fled at the first opportunity

The gardens were almost empty, only once did he catch sight of the shadows of a couple flitting among the vegetation. He heard music and voices, but he could convince himself that he didn't really hear them, that only the jungle, the

city, the lights of the night... When the telephone rang in his ear, Hunt had already been completely cleansed of the miasma of unfulfilled ambitions.

Here, in the cool darkness, among the tangled shadows, in the symphonic rustle of leaves, he spoke to his signet ring. (The evolution of private communication, the ergonomics of solitude: we talk to ourselves. First the miniaturization of devices, then cellular networks, then the miniaturization of cellular devices, the global satellite network; and then the decomposition and standardization of devices.)

"They're keeping her in a hospital, in a psychiatric ward, she asked..."

"Which hospital is it?... Okay, we'll take care of it right away." He disconnected and called the Central Team.

"It's Hunt."

"Checking. Okay."

"Give me Anselm."

"This is Anselm."

"It's Hunt. Trouble with Vassone. An animal probably landed on her."

"An animal...? Don't tell me, really...?"

"That's what it looks like for now."

"Coincidence? I don't believe it."

"Me neither."

"Yellows?"

"I don't know. Never mind, not now. Here's what you'll do..."

He pressed the agate having given Preslawny instructions. Marina, Marina, that you've been hit too...

He went to the railing, through the haze of the safety net's spiderwebs he looked at New York, hundreds of meters below screaming in synesthetic hysteria with thousands of bright lights. The night was breaking from late evening into

early morning, in the eternally lit metropolises of the Western world there are no intermediate times. He glanced at his watch. After three. Number Five should already be in the Lab. Where are the things from his house? They are racing north over the Atlantic. Who will do his psychological profile, since Vassone had her brain plastered?

A signal. He answered. "This is Hunt."

"Information from McFly's team. Contact confirmed, contact confirmed. Initial: first category. Human casualties: two from the team. Courier injured, McFly injured. Request for help. We sent it."

"What about the record?"

"We don't know. But it's still a lot: minimal sensitivity is enough. We have gained proof that the Monadic Wars are possible."

"The history of spiritualism is full of such evidence. Let me know when the matter with this record is resolved."

He hung up.

Losses, losses, losses. What procedure would be absolutely safe? Does such a thing even exist? Doubtful. He leaned against the railing, staring at the woolly blur of the city lights. Oh, if only they were Aliens! He laughed to himself. If only they were those good old Aliens: some spiders, some octopuses, colorful chicken asses, thinking planets, anything from the Hollywood menagerie of super-oddities - but material, tangible, experienced with ordinary senses! What about this? Ghosts, apparitions, hallucinations, abstractions. To hell with that. Quarks interpolated from flashes in vacuum chambers are more real. It's always something that belongs to our reality: after all, we ourselves are made of quarks.

You can go crazy. Oh, my God, I would love to get drunk! A few hours off. Hunt is drunk. Go to the HQ. Let people gossip.

But he didn't even take a step. He just hunched himself more and more, leaning more and more over the city. Marina, who would have thought... That it happened to be you too. Were the Chinese really...? Well, peace is war, war is business, and everything is business.

New York, megapolises, tens of millions of people, tens of millions of minds,

asleep or not; alive, thinking. What grows there? What grows on that pile of hot manure?

HE contacted him through Senator Tito. Back then, it wasn't called the Hunt Team, there wasn't even a Contact Program. They occupied half a floor in the Washington branch of the NSA. Most of the space was taken up by post-PDP supercomputers grinding terabyte DNAM packets of millions of US citizens with their quasi-gene algorithms. Hunt headed a team of a dozen or so computer scientists and technicians, and had two part-time sworn geneticists who supplemented their university salaries in this way. Remotely —Krasnov; Krasnov had been there from the very beginning. An incredible creature. An unsculpted old man with the ambition of a teenager. He was a classic example of a lifelong budget leech, a species that seemed to be endemic to the District of Columbia. He called himself a professor. What really happened with his academic titles, he probably didn't know himself, lost in the thicket of his confabulations and simple lies. As for specializations, Krasnov specialized in what was currently in vogue. At one time, he milked a few foundations for a good few dozen million for research on artificial intelligence. For half a decade, he had similar sums at his disposal, having got involved in another reincarnation of the Star Wars program, the ghost of which will probably haunt the Pentagon until the end of its existence. Krasnov's name also appeared in the context of research on the vaccine for the latest mutation of HIV, nanotechnology, neural-electronic links, bionotechnology, hormone analogues, picotechnology, God knows what else. In the world of official science, he was almost completely unknown —but here, in the Shadowlands, the height of the citation coefficient is usually inversely proportional to the sum of annual subsidies. Krasnov's recent dissertation, *Gene Chaos: The Dynamics of the American Genome*, had secured him a cushy job, a substantial salary, and, most importantly, a fairly high place in the hierarchy of his fellow ronins of science — for at least a year, and potentially five, because Krasnov had immediately begun drafting a resolution at the Hacienda declaring the need to expand research to the entire population of the Earth.

The Department of Defense was financing it, and that was why Hunt had been there. One too many failed parlor intrigues (that's how he liked to think of it)—and that was it: out. As he carried his things out of his old office, he caught a few dry smiles from the staff: see those bloody stumps? this is an open career breakdown, incurable.

He was *effectively* dead; and he felt like a zombie. A position like executive program manager of Krasnov types —let's be honest, this is already a manifestation of the afterlife of Washington political brokers. Time slows down here, the real world, the world of power and money —ebbs, recedes out of reach and sight. Old men in their thirties meet in bars during excessively long lunch breaks and, no longer in a hurry, share memories of lives ended prematurely and tragically.

Vassone called Tito, Tito called Hunt.

"There's this one, she's done something for the government before, Vassone, Marina S. Vassone, asked me, you know, for a favor, would you, Nicholas, be so kind as to..."

"What does she know? Does she have access at all?"

"She does, she does, don't worry about that. It seems she simply came across some references to whatever you're doing there now, whatever that is, because, you know, I don't know, I'm just repeating after her, she's also trying to get money for some research and you two seem to overlap to some extent, I mean, I don't know, anyway, the point is that she can look into the details, the FBI was investigating her, your goodwill, I owe a favor to people who owed her, you know..."

"Okay, whatever, give me her contacts"

She didn't want to do it over the phone, she came in person. That alone gave an ambiguous indication of the level of confidentiality of the subject.

Hunt accepted the invitation in his new office, a miserable little cubicle in fact. Through the walls, you could hear the low hum of the cooling systems of the NSA supercomputers working non-stop. Hunt was even pleased with this visit, which was quite a change from the daily boredom of his pretend job. Outside of that job, things weren't going so well either: Charlotte had found herself a new tiger; mother in rehab again; the stocks in which he had soaked more than half of his savings were steadily falling, and he would not sell them, because if they miraculously rebounded after that emergency sale, he would not be able to stand it any longer. It came to the point that —in order to escape depression —he began writing a dark, alcohol-fueled, political thriller on his work terminal, the main character of which was a medal specimen of a young Washington pig,

evil to the very core of her DNA, and who succeeded in everything indecently, because she did not take anyone or anything into account. Somewhere around the fourth chapter, Hunt noticed that he had an involuntary but ever-growing sympathy for this character, transferring more and more of his feelings to her.

He called an online psychoanalyst. The psychoanalyst advised him to continue writing and, in the end, destroy and humiliate his dark twin. Hunt, using the phraseology of his novel's hero, cursed horribly into the signet ring. Then he erased his work from the crystals. Marina Vassone walked to this.

The flawless beauty of the sculpted woman announced her age despite the lack of signs of aging: forty years, maybe a few less, maybe a few more. Genetic fashions are irreversible. The last generation (or rather the penultimate, because the decision always belongs to the parents) already paid homage to other ideals of beauty: asymmetrical faces, disproportionality and apparent disharmony of their elements, individual, characteristic features designed by expensively paid assistants —genetic sculptors, artists in the art of designing unconceived bodies. Marina's parents, on the other hand, had succumbed to the fashion of their own times, hence the computer-generated perfection of the woman's figure and face: a completely Egyptian skull, eyebrow arches as if drawn with Japanese ink, stained-glass brightness of hair and eyes. In a black polysilk suit, with wide sleeves and high-slit legs, she looked decidedly like a businesswoman or lawyer, not a scientist, as Hunt had conceived —she was the physical opposite of the abnegator Krasnov.

"I understand that you are interested in the work we are conducting in a very professional way," said Hunt, hastily switching on the microphones and cameras for legal insurance, freezing his face into an expressionless mask and performing the greeting rituals according to the rules of NEti. "In the meantime, it shows me here that you are a neurophysiologist by education, whatever that really means. Professor at Boston, Department of Cognitive Science and Neural Systems, Center for Adaptive Systems. Hmm, it also says here: psychiatry, mathematics... This mathematics —where does it come from?"

"Neural networks" she replied laconically. "Brain analogs."

"Anyway, what does this have to do with us? Have you read Krasnov's *Gene Chaos*?"

"Yes. That's why. I want to use your data banks to find people with DNAM

of certain specific parameters.”

”To be completely honest, that’s actually illegal.”

”That’s why I came here and not to the Department of Health.”

”Well. Basically, you are authorized. But please realize that knowledge alone will do you no good, because to use it or announce it anywhere outside these walls, you will need a high official blessing, a kind word from Senator Tito certainly will not be enough.”

”Once I find it, everyone will bless me.”

”What exactly is this?”

”Do I have your permission?”

”Yes, yes.”

”I need your computers to interpolate a telepath’s DNA and broadly screen the population through a filter profiled according to that.”

”Telepath?” Hunt laughed.

”Passive.”

”You’re joking.”

”Yes, of course. Can you give me an authorization? I’d like to start this today.”

”Doctor, I can’t delay the program by using our computing power for such nonsense.”

”Half a percent? A per mill? How much will you lose, a few hours?”

”For such a fun game of science fiction? Fifteen minutes too much. They’d skin me alive.”

”At first, everything is just science fiction. I can provide evidence. I have hundreds of hours of film with irrefutable experiments.”

”Everything can be refuted. If this is telepathy, you should have gone straight

to Langley, Fort Meade, or the Pentagon, they would have welcomed these mind thieves with open arms.”

”But I don’t want to find them so they can spy on Chinese diplomats or chase double agents.”

”Why?”

”They’ll find God for me.”

BLACK woke up and felt silence. The void roared around him. No trace of thought. His body informed him of weightlessness. Space. Alone. For the first time without reflections, without contamination —other people’s physiologies, other people’s psyches. *You always know*. He lay motionless, as if paralyzed, not opening his eyes. Planned, planned, everything planned. A place of perfect isolation, for me and people like me. Number Five. Four of my predecessors were reduced to the level of plants here.

He lifted his eyelids and saw with his own eyes what he had seen earlier through the fog of Flower’s peripheral sensations and thoughts. The habitat was the size of two train compartments. Two small, round windows in opposite walls. The walls were built up to the last centimeter. At the top, above the bed —a vast miniLEDscreen wallpaper.

Black barely had time to blink after waking up —the face of a politely smiling man glared at him. Sculpted from a generation and a half ago, Black concluded. A Native American-Creole model *a la* Hollywood, although the features were sharper and the complexion golden, and the mustache black, completely at odds with the current television ideal.

”This is a recording” said the man on the screen. Hidden speakers filled the habitat with his calm voice. ”My name is Nicholas Hunt. Please calm down, you are in no danger. In fact, I am personally responsible for your safety and I will do my best to provide you with the most comfortable conditions. I cannot deny that you were kidnapped. However, this is also fully justified by concern for your safety. It is not our intention to harm you. I do not know how long you will have to remain in this orbital facility. In any case, few people can afford such trips; everything has its advantages” Hunt smiled wider, showing snow-white teeth.

“We will contact you soon to discuss the details of our cooperation. You can obtain all information regarding the habitat and its equipment directly from the computer lab, starting with the menu you will see in a moment. The screen is sensory. Please do not worry: we are constantly monitoring and keeping an eye on everything. However, in an emergency situation, you can connect with the officer on duty using the HELP2 option or simply by saying such a request out loud. Once again: we apologize and assure you of your complete safety. In the meantime, please familiarize yourself with your new home. End.”

The face disappeared, the screen was covered with a mosaic of smaller and larger icons.

”I want to talk to the officer on duty,” said Black.

In the upper left corner, a small Earth with headphones on began to rotate.

”Officer on duty,” the speakers started.

”Only audio?”

”Unfortunately. How can I help you?”

”Am I accused of something?”

”No. We do not represent the justice system.”

”What or who do you represent?”

“You know.”

“Yes. I understand that I can’t contact anyone or send any messages.”

“You can’t.”

“This about my father’s accident —was that a lie?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, there was no other way to get you to the States.”

“What do you want from me?”

“That’s not in my area of responsibility.”

“What if I committed suicide?”

“Try it.”

“Gas?”

“Among other things.”

“This is an international scandal. You’ll never let me out.”

“That’s not in my area of responsibility.”

“Am I talking to a live person or a Turing machine?”

“A live person, sir.”

“What’s this ‘justification of concern for my safety’?”

“Mr. Hunt will explain.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“Do you have me under constant surveillance and are eavesdropping?”

“Yes”

“What happened to him?”

“That’s not within my purview.”

“Thank you.”

The globe with the headphones disappeared.

Black carefully sat down on the bed. In the orbital plane he hadn’t felt it, but now his vision was blurring to the point of complete momentary blackout. Blood was rushing to his head in waves. Fortunately, he wasn’t throwing up, at least that much. His gaze found the numerous handles installed in the walls. In the movies, cosmonauts somehow never needed them, they hung motionless as if by sheer force of will. It took the Black half a minute to position himself “above” the porthole. He couldn’t see much. He shouted at the light. It went out. He put his nose to the plastic. Yes, yes, it was true: a planet was spinning down there. The blue of the ocean, the white of the clouds, the dirty yellow of

the continents. The sun must have been behind him then, the terminus at a nadir, too sharp an angle, the other one was not visible either, too low. Silence reigned in the habitat, only his own breath hissing in his ears. The minutes passed, and he watched and watched, not even blinking. Once he had been hypnotized in this way by the movement of the sea waves, he had sat on the beach for half a day, not even realizing the passage of time. But this now —this is even more powerful. His eyes, accustomed to the air being impaired by the whiteness, falsely assured Black of the proximity of the Earth: a few kilometers, just around the corner. That's not true. After all, his vision covers almost the entire hemisphere, he doesn't even have to turn his head. As they say on in those movies? A high perch.

Peace, peace, peace, peace peace peace... Rotate your mantra in your mind until everything else is swept away and only a meaningless cluster of sounds remains. Mind like a lake. Mind like the wind over the fields. Mind like the blue sky. Like the vacuum of space.

...all my horses, Alabaster, Witch, what's wrong with you, where are you..

What the hell, horses?! "Horses" —an insidious inclusion, nothing else...! Fear gripped him again. This was unbearable, he'd tear his nerves to shreds here —and he hadn't even talked to this Hunt yet.

He consulted the habitat computer through the screen wallpaper, it stuck the tip of an injector to his arm, and then prescribed a strong sedative.

HE felt sick from the luminous vastness stretched under the net and had to sit on a garden bench. He was used to the rebellion of physiology, but not the rebellion of imagination. The city terrified him. He did not want to look, the associations were overwhelming.

He went back upstairs. The party was entering a heavy blues climate in terms of tempo and mood. He exchanged a few perfunctory phrases and said goodbye to his sister and brother-in-law. The butler at the men's elevator door gave him his coat.

The elevator waiting room was all mirrors. Hunt was four-faceted. Wherever you looked —he, he, he. He may not have been an impressive figure, but he cer-

tainly made an impression. The body and bodies of this setting, the outfit with all the accessories —they were designed with identical attention to detail and the final appearance of the whole. The composition was completely harmonious, captivating with a kind of muted, natural elegance. He wore them in such a way that almost every person directly, physically confronting him —automatically fell into forms of submission and began to behave like a medieval vassal. Well, no exaggeration. Nevertheless, he personified the aristocracy of those times, the real one: not hereditary, not based on tradition, knowledge, or even money —but a place occupied in the structure of the flow of information.

Of course, in reality he no longer belonged to it, and the image was false. He looked into his own eyes and lowered his gaze.

But still—straight, head high, shoulders back, hands symmetrically behind his back, leg pushed forward slightly bent in the manner of Roman emperors. Jet-black hair almost shines in mirrors, tightly pulled back and braided into a short braid. A stiff cravat rises in a white wave over a purple jacket, in the middle a purple hieroglyph: the juridictor's logo. Black trousers, white tabi: simple lines and simple colors. Snowy lace explodes from under his sleeves. On his manicured fingers, the only jewelry: a Sony signet ring with a cat-eyed agate. All the fabrics are visibly natural, no mono-yarn. When he moves, you can hear them rustle. He always moves energetically, with an intimidating determination (this is also partly innate, partly trained). He is handsome, but everyone here is so handsome. He looked up and smiled to himself under his mustache, and for that moment, there was something of the movie villain in him too.

He fell to the roof of the WTC on a mono-string (fortunately its cabin had no windows), here he changed to a second, internal elevator and floated down directly to the garage level. Someone had just arrived with a dog, a small, screeching mongrel. The small but fierce beast began to bark at Nicholas out of pure spite, and he finally got angry and turned around, ready to kick it against the concrete wall; but half a second earlier the mongrel had tucked its tail between its legs and run away to its master.

Finally, the summoned car rolled up.

"Central," Hunt told him as he got in.

"Yes, Central, we're on our way, sir," and indeed, they were.

Hunt polarized his windows and called up the CNN newscast on the front, profiled for him by his personal filtering program. In the news under "General" there was a striking piece of information about some tragedy in southern Mexico, many dead bodies. A reincarnation of Trotsky again? Nicholas was interested and called up the information. The label mentioned a sect. Ritual murder? But no. The sect belonged to the apocalyptic genre, those whose leader had a revelation, he was visited by little green people, and now he is gathering a chosen nation to fill a cosmic ark. Usually it turns out that the ark will only take souls —so they cut off the bodies. It seemed so in this case too: one night they started hanging themselves and shooting themselves in the head. One hundred and forty dead bodies. The first links led to a slightly less bloody slaughter in a Swiss villa in the Alps: dismembered bodies, red on the snow...

For as long as Hunt could remember, since childhood, he had heard about similar incidents all the time. He had been brought up in the belief that the world was inherently crazy and only here and there can one find oases of common sense in it. What is more: he perceived reality as a conglomeration of animate and inanimate elements, in constant and aimless motion, because they were torn by forces that were completely beyond their control and understanding.

Going deeper and deeper into the virtual libraries (which have the characteristic of opening the way to ten more, even more interesting ones with each text learned), young Hunt followed, as if in a time-lapse film played back, the process of the disintegration of reality.

Chaos began to prevail over order with the end of the Cold War —because the Cold War was, after all, a kind of scheme, and when it ceased to be adequate, no new one was found in its place. The translation from the historiosophical to the existential perspective was almost immediate: as if missiles with nuclear warheads aimed at each other gave meaning to the life of every average citizen from both sides of the Curtain! There was a dirty absurdity lurking in this, but the coincidence was undeniable in Hunt's eyes.

From that point of disengagement, subsequent elements of the perceived world eluded, one by one, understanding, description and purposeful analysis. It became increasingly difficult to say why and when things were happening, what was happening; and worse —what was actually happening. A person turned on the television and could only watch kaleidoscopes of colorful reports from places of madness, listen to official statements and hysterical incantations.

Connecting them with each other, setting some course, reaching back to the roots, clearly naming them —remained beyond his capabilities. The dominant attitude, therefore, became one of unthinking acceptance, as it was the only one guaranteeing some kind of mental peace.

It is not that people suddenly lost their purpose in life or were seized by the pain of existence. Hunt had no illusions about human nature —in any case, the overwhelming majority live only by the force of inertia, and experience the torments of vegetation at most in the form of a morning hangover, post-coital depression or visits to the dentist. But having lost their sense of belonging, participation, deprived of an imaginative apparatus for explaining the reality around them, people ceased, each and every one of them, to play any role in it, even a negative one. The world, history, life —exploded nearby, and these were wild elements about which a person could say as much as his hairy ancestor from thousands of years ago about lightning igniting a neighboring tree.

Now, however, not a day went by without news, from the country or the world, about another collective madness. Those with less than a dozen corpses were no longer included in standard services at all, unless there were exceptionally picturesque photos.

What's going on, Hunt mused, as the BMW's tinted windshield flashed with footage of the South American Timber Cartel's press conference, where its board was diplomatically *de facto* declaring a medium-term war on the Siberian Holdings; what's going on, people's lives are starting to feel less and less important? It's not just suicides, irrationality is spreading like a plague. Can a civilization become mentally ill? What treatment would be appropriate for it?

A phone call, second priority. He snapped his signet ring.

"It's Anselm. We've got a draft budget for next year. One hundred percent from the Corps, a shift without compensation."

"Shit."

"No. They're eating us."

"Kleist?"

"Kleist, Fortzhauser, someone from that group. A-aaa..."

"What?"

"Nothing, I feel like sleeping, we had a nervous night."

Hunt mentally scrolled through the list of vassals and falling sovereigns. He chose Oiol. As far as he knew, he had the highest priority with him.

Oiol clearly didn't sleep either.

"It's Hunt. Who joined the subcommittee?"

"Which one?"

"Ours, and which one?"

"What?"

"Is it just me, or is Bronstein actually weakening? They're letting us off the hook."

"Really?"

"Haven't you heard about the budget? They're making us dependent on the EDC. Since when do presidents voluntarily give up their second terms?"

"Heh heh, maybe that's why. He's shedding unnecessary ballast."

"But you're taking on Tantriks. So how is it?"

"I don't know. I think it's Krutsch, he's a McManamara."

"But the McManamaras are retirees!"

"Not anymore. The first thing you'll hear on CNN is an interview, the senator is concerned about the youth and the next generations of Americans."

"Damn it. How much will it be?"

"Three out of three, but Szczurek is pro-enclavist."

"A dozen gods and all are blind."

"Having finished with this sarcastic wordmeme from 'The Huns,' Hunt in turn connected with a certain Gonzales Red, nicknamed Flak, who was the

chief memetic sapper of the 'Washington Post.'"

Flak was asleep; but Flak owed Hunt so many favors that the time of day didn't matter.

"McManamara's on the offensive," Nicholas snapped. "Who's doing this?"

"Brodsky and Brodsky Adv." Red replied quickly. "They're good, you sons of bitches."

"I know, I wear a mustache myself."

"True. They've had some sympathy for immigrants and provided a few drug pipes for the savages lately, you know, the white angels. I'm breaking them," he boasted.

"That's good. How bad?"

"There'll be an editorial. What do you think? We get contributions from some fund every week."

"You'll go for Krutsch."

"Krutsch, Krutsch... I get it! What's he riding on?"

"Tax exemptions on investment income. But he'll make a sudden leap in a few days. You'll knock him off in mid-air."

"We'll try."

"You'll knock him off in mid-air, Flak."

Political aikido always dictates that you use someone else's momentum, and who's going to hit McManamara the hardest if not the presidential co-lobbies, Radick, and the retirees? Hunt still has enough friends there.

He called the president of Safe Old Age. It took him five minutes to get through the secretarial program.

"Nicholas Hunt. Do you remember me?"

"Yes."

"You know about McManamara."

"Yes."

"When you make him a proposal... mention black orchids."

"Black orchids?"

"Yes. I can be checked. Bronstein, Krutsch. I have my reasons. You're not risking much. Try it. Good luck."

"Thank you."

"Something occurred to him and he called Oiol again."

"Listen, if this goes well, suggest that we level the playing field. Why only us? Krasnov? Do you have any idea how much Dry Springs eats? How fucked up its financing structure is?"

"Ha, good idea."

He counted on Krasnov being stronger. If you're going down, cling to whatever you can. He didn't believe that Krasnov would suddenly sink.

Hunt had met the old man of everything twice so far, but that was enough for the Russian to permanently ingrain himself in his memory and association structure. Oh, Krasnov was a figure, Krasnov was a legend! He had a nose, he had that characteristic sense of emerging trends in science —no one could deny that he had that ability. Yet it seemed that this was his only truly outstanding feature, and that all of Krasnov's "successes" could be attributed simply to his insatiable ambition.

It was no different in the case of the old "professor's" latest project (as far as Hunt knew, Krasnov had never held a permanent position at any university). His semi-secret memorandum, pompously titled *Gene Chaos: The Dynamics of the American Genome*, was no more than a collection of questions and unsynthesized information from various fields that had coalesced in Krasnov's mind into the germ of a new theory. New as new: Hunt saw it rather as a series of truisms taken to extremes. But Krasnov knew how to write well enough to disturb the bureaucrats in power, and in his articles he knew how to combine the appearance of scientific objectivity with the pathos of television doomsday pro-

phets —and it caught on. The rest, the actual mental work, was done for him by others. Currently, the Gene Chaos theory appeared to be ninety-five percent the work of a group of paid consultants hired by Hunt at the beginning of the Program—back then (when was that, Nicholas wondered to himself, not even a year had passed!), it had been a completely different Program. But no one had any doubts that it would be remembered as "Krasnov's theory."

Autoevolution, Krasnov wrote, is the creation of the genetic future of a species by its representatives. This term began to be commonly used after the commercialization of the technology of "sculpting" the DNA of a planned child. Completely wrong.

In order to be able to talk about any evolution, a continuous process of inheritance must take place, and here we are dealing with nothing like that, because genetic sculpting is not limited to one generation, but equally concerns the entire line of "descendants" stretched along the time axis. If sculptors performed their operations on DNA that actually comes from parents, at least introns would be inherited. However, genetic sculptors have their own —identical for all clients —framework genomes, from which they always start the process of computer selection of deoxyribonucleotides. Nothing, literally nothing, passes from mother and father to their "child," not even mitochondrial codes. The evolution of the species was cut off as if with a lancet, then only as the evolution of fashions.

Secondly —and here Krasnov reached the source of the threat/opportunity —this cut was "unclean." If only it actually affected the entire species...! But it does not. The earthworm of the world economy stretches and stretches —here we toil away over genetic fashions, and in the heart of Africa, they still murder each other with Kalashnikovs, spears, machetes and multiply according to tribal tradition, twelve from one mother, ten die, Darwin at his zenith, pure element. In itself, from a genetic point of view this is nothing bad, on the contrary, it is the natural state, it has been like this for thousands of years and it should be like this, not because of this problem. Not because of the sculpting as such, because if it was obligatory for every inhabitant of Earth —it would not pose any threat either. The problem, however, arises from the confusion of both of these systems, their simultaneous functioning in a population of almost eight billion —with only eight percent manipulating their genome.

"Let us be clear" Krasnov thundered "the fact that we have divided the DNA of *Homo sapiens* into groups of genes according to their embryogenetic

functions does not at all mean that we know what any of their configurations can give in the phenotype; in fact, it is doubtful that we will ever know this in the future. Genetic sculptors activate thousands of such sets of genes every day, which do not and have never occurred in the natural history of the species, or did occur but were eliminated in the process of further selection. For an individual carrying them in their cell nuclei, this has no significance whatsoever: he has —resulting from previous tests —a company guarantee from conception to death. It would also have no significance if he left no descendants other than sculpted ones. But this would be an ideal, model state, unattainable in reality, where there is a constant flow of genes from populations with widespread genetic design to populations still subject only to Darwin's laws. This river of artifact genes conceived in the depths of the fuzzy logic of our supercomputers —tears with the force of the outward Amazon, into the ocean of seven billion *Homo sapiens*, then naturally recombining this alien, new DNA with unsculpted DNA or, worse, with other sculptured DNA; and again; and again; and still with fresh admixtures... It spreads through the population like a jungle fire."

Who can predict what branches from the species' trunk this completely chaotic process will bear in the future —or has borne fruit already? Vassone came and said: "Telepaths, among others."

Marina, Marina, Hunt sighed inwardly, such self-confidence befits only prophets, and even they are not healthy.

The car stopped, the cataracts fell from the windows. "We're here," the car said. An underground garage again. Hunt got out, headed for the elevator. Both elevators, male and female, were private, rented along with the two highest floors of Cygnus Tower by a fake company that the DIA usually used in such situations. The doors were locked with an electronic card and a thumbprint, and after entering the cabin, a live guard from the station above checked the guest through a camera. Hunt made a grim face at the lens. The elevator started, he bent his knees. When he braked, it was even worse, the senator's champagne rose to his throat.

A moment of weightlessness reminded him of Number Five. He would have to talk to him. What about Vassone, a profiler was urgently needed. Work for the SS, damn it.

He went straight to Anselm. Preslawny was snoring, sprawled on his desk as if on a cross, one hand in the drawer, the other hanging over a stiffened

LEDscreen.

Hunt swung and banged the door, making his ears ring.

Anselm fell to the floor. He howled.

"What's up?" Hunt asked politely, looking under the furniture.

Anselm's nose was bleeding. He squinted, trying to look at his hand with wide streaks of red on its back and at Hunt leaning over him at the same time.

"Hunticide" he growled and threw himself at Nicholas. The other jumped back.

Anselm started to scramble from all fours.

"Son of a bitch."

"You slept on duty."

"Fucking official."

"Nice to meet you."

"I'll take you to court."

"You can't, you signed a waiver of rights, and there's no insurance network here. Besides, I shit on NEti."

"You sadistic..."

"Okay, okay, blow off some steam. Where's the colonel?"

"He went after McFly. His people, he'll have to write letters. Get ready for a downpour." He held up his hand. "Give me your hand."

"Right! You'd drag me downstairs. Besides, you're covered in blood, go wash up."

"I'd like to see the face of the cardiologist who opens your chest. Fucking freak of nature. Maybe at least give him some tissues."

Hunt threw him the box and sat down on the edge of the desk. Anselm settled on the floor, in the corner of the room, and began a doomed battle with

the stains.

"How's Number Five?" Nicholas asked.

"He woke up and immediately started throwing himself around. I plugged him with the standard formulas and sent him back to you. He doesn't seem crazy."

"What about Marina?"

"Her brothers will be here soon."

"If she stays clean for ten hours, have her brought here."

"Here? What if the bastard drags her in?"

He'll drag her in. What can we do, lock ourselves up in a fortress?

"I'm telling you, it was a crazy idea from the start. We've just poked an anthill with a stick."

"Vassone, tell me."

"Who fights by the sword. Oh, the State Department called again. One of us should routinely give them an opinion on these reports from the surveillance of their bigwigs. We shouldn't have sent them a copy then, every other failed decision forecast is now explained by monads on foreign intelligence leashes. Vassone's case is grist to their mill. In the e-mail, there is an analysis of these imaginary Monad Wars, authored by a certain Hatz or Katz. If he is allowed by the Department of Defense, he will come here, he will be here in a few days. Krasnov is going crazy at the Hacienda, instead of throwing doctors at Estep, he is playing with bionano blockers, Efes and coming up with grand theories, there was another request to send someone there to supervise."

"Efes? What does he see in it?"

"Bah! How did they come up with it a month ago —Krasnov's assistant dreamed it, can you believe it? —it went like a charm. I've never seen such technological acceleration in my life, from experiment to practical applications in weeks, not a single dead end, Krasnov blesses, everything went smoothly. Wait another month and he'll tell you that he'll win the Wars this way."

"At least it's some kind of reference point when reviewing applications for funding. Did someone order this Efes?"

"Nobody. Nobody even thought about it."

"Exactly. Wasting budget funds, expenses not in line with the specifications, embezzlement. We'll see who rides whom."

"What did you hear at the party in the heavenly spheres? How are the moods in the capital tilting? Is it time to accuse us now or ridicule us?"

"I guess one doesn't exclude the other, at least according to them" Hunt muttered thoughtfully; in the meantime, the windmills of associations turned. "Listen, I'd like you to sit someone down to analyze all these mass madnesses, you know, sects, suicides, things like that."

"In what context? Thoughtful? What is this supposed to be, maybe a historical outline for educating children?"

"Nope. Sit someone down with a head on their shoulders, let them try to synthesize it somehow, we're dealing with a clear tendency here, a long-term process... I don't know, damn it, let them think. I tried once, but... I'm going to sleep, I don't feel like going home." He stood up, yawned. "Anselm, for God's sake, wash up, you look like a *voodoo* priest at work."

"Peace be with you, Nicholas, peace be with you."

THE "JFK" landed, customs officers checked the flight, Flowers signed the papers and hired nurses carried the unconscious man to the ambulance. They drove in the gray light of the city's dawn, the driver was asleep, the computer woke him up after reaching the destination. They carried the unconscious man out on a stretcher. As instructed, they laid it on the elevator floor and drove off.

The elevator stopped one floor below the Central Office. Number Four was wheeled on a stretcher through white corridors to a ward immersed in semidarkness. Here a doctor and a nurse took care of him: they undressed him, examined him briefly, described him. There were half a dozen full-care medical machines in the ward, three of these sarcophagi were already filled —organisms cleansed

of pneuma were breathing slowly and laboriously in them.

Another sarcophagus opened like a flower, with asymmetrical metal, plastic and glass petals, reaching for a man in a coma. The machine took him into its womb, surrounded him with countless arms, covered him with semi-transparent membranes and invaded his body with needles, probes, sensors, electrodes. Four sets of small LEDscreens, counters and diodes woke up —here and in the next room —angular hieroglyphs of life lit up.

The doctor and nurse left. They were sleeping sleeplessly, Four expired. The machines hugged them. Only their faces were clearly visible.

Blackness

SHE arrived in New York in the evening. She was escorted all the way to the headquarters by two bodyguards assigned to her in Boston.

Hunt was waiting in her office. He didn't wake up until late afternoon; lying down, he took off and switched off the phone, and ordered the secretarial program to say that he was "unavailable," which in today's times could only mean a state very close to clinical death.

In the evening, he put on light trousers and a dark waistcoat. His necktie was necessarily snow-white, with a silver pin with the logo of his juridical corporation in it, and his ponytail was tied with gold thread. He still dressed like a Washington official, although he had stopped identifying with the self from those times. But the habits remained. The standard make-up around the eyes and the profiled eyebrows gave his face a certain predatory look, which also belonged to the capital's (read: Hollywood's) canon of male beauty.

"How does it feel?" he asked Vassone, after first exchanging the ritual pleasantries of NEti with her, which took almost fifteen minutes. Their relations were still strictly formalized, they did not want make some irreversible mistake, rashly stepping outside the bounds of etiquette. It meant something, but Hunt wasn't sure what exactly. He asked himself once again: Should I send a matchmaker to her?

"Nasty," Vassone muttered, sinking into the window seat.

"Why did you go to Boston at all? You'd better give up on lecturing and everything else, there's enough to do here. The Fifth's things have arrived, I'm

waiting for the profile and instructions, I'll have to start negotiating with him soon. It's a good thing he's shot himself in the vein and is sleeping in the meantime. U-uu, how it looks. With your nails?"

"Uh-huh"

"I guess there's no way without surgery, it won't heal on its own without scars. Does it hurt?"

"Not now."

"Have you heard about McFly?"

"That haunted house in Montana? What happened?"

"It entered the medium with hooves. A massacre. Two corpses. But we have the record. Well, tell me: how does it feel?"

Marina stared out the full-wall window at the city waking up to night life. As usual, she was completely composed: not a single uncontrolled twitch of facial muscles. She could have stayed like that for hours —and Hunt could have watched her for hours. Wide scars the color of clotted blood outlined her cheeks from top to bottom and diagonally.

"It's not at all how we imagined it," she finally said. "Not coercion at all; and not taking control of the body; not even a split personality. I would rather look for an analogy with drugs. Now, you see, I really hated myself for killing my children."

"You only have one child, Jason."

"I know. I know! But their memory was so clear, I remembered their names, their appearances, I remembered how I would sit in the living room in front of the incubi and watch them grow... I still remember, even more clearly. The interior of some house, and that man, that was my husband. Things like that... the smell of his skin, the reflection of the sun on the furniture, through the windows you could see the ocean... I know it was the ocean... I —I mean, not me: she, that woman —but I remember it, so somehow I do too... They were so small, two and three years old, he went somewhere for work, he didn't come back, and they screamed and screamed, and I was young, very young... You know, I even remember her excuses. But most of all the children, my God, those children.

She turned them off like you turn off a computer. She stopped feeding them, gagged them, locked them in the bathroom, went to play. Peace. I remember how I did it. Do you understand? I remember it. If it were to be completely alien, copied from someone else's life... it mixed, blended, intertwined, adapted to my own memory! In one of my memories, I make love to her/my husband under a mirror —and in the reflection it is me, me! The monad fell away, but it left a piece of itself, a sting, venom, and now it is eating into me, pushing its tentacles, growing. The cancer of false memory. There, in the restaurant, it fell on me, as if someone had suddenly cured me of great amnesia. I remembered —this is what it was like: I remembered."

Hunt waited tactfully for a moment in silence, then asked, carefully manifesting indifference in his tone of voice:

"So could this really be the competition? Because you don't believe in coincidence, do you?"

She grimaced

"No, it wasn't coincidence."

"So? Who? The French? Or maybe the Hong Kong Company? We need to do something about it, cook up some kind of reassuring report, because if the story spreads in a panic... Horror. Everyone there considers themselves a potential target. What, are they going to do heavy psychoanalysis on themselves every day at the entrance to determine their mental identity?"

Vassone smiled from the corner of her mouth

"Behind that house," she hummed "on the shore of the ocean, almost on the beach —there was a stud farm, and it was my stud farm, very much mine, my horses, Arabians, each at least a mega." She looked at Hunt. "There's not a shred of logic in it, is there?"

"Wait a minute..."

"Exactly."

"I had no idea that Number Four was such a vindictive bastard. When did he manage to train her?"

"When he supposedly had a headache." Marina snorted. "Then it flattened him and the beast broke free from the leash, besides, the leash itself disappeared. He probably didn't plan it that way. Maybe he wanted to blackmail us. It's strange that he didn't aim something at you. He probably didn't have enough time."

"You shouldn't have gotten into an argument with him then. In general... Day after day, long conversations, your face on the screen... He had all the data to program that monad on you, even from himself. Only I will talk to Number five from now on."

"You'll be all the more determined. Since the Fourth figured it out, the Fifth will almost certainly. It's a pity you didn't decide to falsify your appearance in the transmissions, it would have made it impossible for him to aim. Now? You don't know the day or the hour. He's in the same lab, the psychomemes are accumulating, he'll eventually get the same idea. Someone should be watching you twenty-four hours a day now."

"If I suddenly feel like jumping out the window, no one could stop me."

"That's also true."

They sat in silence again.

The sun was setting over New York. She turned with her chair, he could see her in profile now, her fair hair splitting the light around her head, surrounding her with a halo of pastel colors, a warm glow; while she herself remained pale, cold. Hunt adjusted his cravat, turned his gaze to the dark menhirs of buildings. Should he send a matchmaker or not?

MARINA VASSONE'S legal status in the Team was not fully defined, which irritated Hunt more and more over time. Nominally, he was the manager, but the Program's statute and the whispered directives from above left him with so little room to maneuver that someone like Fortzhauser could consider himself a de facto manager of an independent department, equal in position to him. Vassone behaved no differently. On the one hand, it was she, her work, her experiments, her theories that contributed to the establishment of the Team. On the other hand, once it was established, she did not want to get too involved

in it and officially served only as a consultant in creating psychological profiles of the caught telepaths. Hunt was convinced that she would gladly get out of this as well, if only it did not mean that she would be completely cut off from information about the research being conducted, the data of which she clearly needed for her work. This ambivalence in her attitude was intriguing. Besides, most of her words and decisions remained unclear, incomprehensible to Hunt, adorned with twisted subtext.

But he still wouldn't let her go. Returning to his office, he called up the files of Number Five on the blacked-out windows. Biography: dry and perfunctory. Father: a fourth-generation returnee from the US, sculpted, a pheno-slav. Mother: a native Pole, unsculpted. They got their father's DNAM out of the Health Department through a back door, their mother's DNAM was simply stolen from the Brussels database of EU organ donors.

Over fifty Sneakers worked in the States and abroad for the needs of the Hunt Team, they brought in terabytes of DNAM from all over the world, the Central Office computers were constantly expanding in all directions with blocks of crystal memory, they already occupied half of the bottom floor. The Sneakers themselves were hired by blind intermediaries for individual tasks, they had no idea what they were actually doing or for whom. That is, Hunt hoped was the case. What the sneakerheads really knew... It was not without reason that the legal insurance network had been dismantled from the Central Office premises.

The scanned and translated diary of Number Five was to Hunt one pile of nonsense and gibberish, written in a small, precise, almost technical handwriting. He struggled through it. But Vassone could read their souls from such things. Only she could do that. Let the sneakerheads mediate all his information channels, she had ordered it as they were considering a way to intercept Number Five. Let them simulate a serious accident with his father and a summons for his only son to his deathbed. He would come. Why would he come? The Team had wondered, after all he was a telepath, he loved no one, and certainly not his father. He would come, Vassone repeated unwaveringly. He did.

After all, it was her theory.

"They're not crazy, but they're not normal in the usual sense of the word," she'd told him over lunch during a break in negotiations with Number Two four months ago. "Forget about those special-effects movies full of power-mad maniacs and psychopaths. It's all nonsense." Hunt listened in silence, his gaze

resting on her face, demonstrating his interest in the subject. He didn't interrupt experts pontificating on their specialties; he had learned that kind of humility in his exile. They were eating in a restaurant on the seventieth floor, and through the open doors and windows onto the terrace they could see the mirrored glass of two floors of the Cygnus Tower Headquarters across the street. Here, most of the employees of the Team ate at Santuccio.

"First, please acknowledge," Vassone continued, seemingly focused on her steak "that telepathy —passive, i.e., unidirectional, because we have not encountered any other so far, unless we consider all people to be telepaths —is an inherent individual trait, genetically determined and in no way subject to suppression, atrophy or external manipulation, pharmacological or otherwise. The Hacienda is doing nothing more than throwing money down the drain."

"But evolutionists" Hunt butted in, to show off his stolen knowledge, "maintain that if telepathy were possible, it would have appeared in a mutation at some point and become dominate in the species; and it is not."

"Such an argument" Vassone replied, lifting her fork "is based on the implicit assumption that telepathy is, from the point of view of selection, a naturally positive factor, that is, increasing the chance of spreading the genome, which includes the genes encoding it. Meanwhile, this is an unfounded claim. What's more, from the experience with our telepaths so far, someone could conclude that it is a lethal mutation. For example, Krasnov thinks so."

"Krasnov...!" Hunt snorted. It never hurts to agree with the personal prejudices of an expert.

"I wouldn't go that far," Marina shrugged, "but it's clearly a disabling trait. If we go back to the animal level, we have every right to consider it a complete disability: imagine a carnivore who feels the same as its prey. No wonder these genes, having appeared, die "without offspring." What's more, they appear very rarely. Well, unless we have such an era of Gene Chaos."

With quick, surgical cuts she cut off a piece of meat, raised it to her mouth, chewed, swallowed. She had small, nicely shaped lips, she didn't paint her lips. Small, snow—white teeth flashed between them.

A meat eater, Hunt thought, a meat eater. "But let's get back to people." She took a sip of wine. "If we want to have some idea of the psyche of telepa-

ths, we have to start with their childhood, or even earlier —from the prenatal phase. It is not the case that a fetus is an insensitive pre-organism with a non-functioning brain. In fact, everyone probably realizes that a fetus receives a lot of things that happen in the environment. I am not talking here about Grof's transpersonal psychology, because the popularization of incubi has falsified its dogmas of postpartum trauma; but a person's mental life undoubtedly does not begin at the moment of cutting off their umbilical cord. A child recognizes and likes music that was played particularly often near their incubator —you will find these and similar platitudes in any incubology handbook. However, in the case of a telepath, another very important sense is added. For already in the prenatal phase, when the structures of the brain are formed and begin to crystallize, the telepath is open to foreign thoughts. His increasingly conscious mind is drowning in a flood of sensations and feelings belonging to people in the immediate vicinity of the incubus. A normal child will not experience the full spectrum of visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and so on —earlier than at a certain stage of development. A telepath, on the other hand, is packed with all of this before he even possesses the organs appropriate for these senses: he sees without eyeballs, he tastes without taste buds."

Having said that, she took another small sip of wine, raised her eyes and smiled knowingly at Hunt from the corner of her mouth. What would this agreement be about? The joke? Its subtext? The situation? Hunt could only guess. But he responded with a smile anyway. In this way, they were misleading each other. The multi-level misunderstandings were cumulating in mutual discomfort and confusion. Nicholas did not rule out that Marina considered him as mysterious as he considered her. There was no way to break through this barrier.

How at such moments he envied telepaths their certainty of objective truth about people, their ability to look at themselves from the outside.

"Besides," Vassone continued, putting down her glass, "it seems less important compared to the second type of influence: other people's thoughts and feelings imported directly into the mind. It is no wonder that telepaths are characterized by such high intelligence and linguistic abilities; almost everything went to their frontal lobes. Here we get a vision of a brutal linguistic invasion of a young mind, only just beginning to organize. Let's imagine the following situation: someone is reading a book in an armchair by an incubus. Not only is the fetus's mind prematurely shackled by the formalities of language, but it also receives a gigantic dose of contextual impressions and rigid denotations.

Let's note: in the referent of specific words, each of us sees something different, depending on his or her accumulated individual experiences, and when reading the word 'bird' something different is automatically displayed under his or her skull. Where do the telepath's experiences come from? They are experiences of experiences; he or she steals them from other people, from many different people."

"Do you mean to say that he or she, hmm, inherits the Psyche of his or her parents?"

"That's too much of a simplification. After all, they don't necessarily have to be the legal parents, and usually a much larger number of people are involved: neighbors, relatives, acquaintances, an incubation technician, specialists called in to repair the air conditioning... Do you understand? It is not a simple accident, as one might imagine by analogy with the inheritance of a random puzzle of DNA from a mother and father in the natural process of reproduction. But there is some truth in it: these are the foundations on which the telepath's psyche will be built. After all —and here we come to another important issue —it will never be a psyche that fits the one considered normal even in non-telepaths. I do not want to get into the subtleties of psychology here, I will try to illustrate the matter with simple examples. Do you have children?"

"No"

"Have you encountered any? Small, a few years old. I mean, you know..."

"A small child does not separate himself from the world in a way that we adults consider so natural that it is negligible in description. When he does start to speak —please note this sometime —he does not even use the pronoun 'I.' The transition from the outside to his own self is continuous. 'Johnny is cold.' 'Johnny wants to see this.' 'Johnny is hungry.' Exactly, in the third person. Now imagine a child who perceives the world as much through his own senses as through the senses of others, of people around him. A child who perceives himself —from the outside. With other people's thoughts, impressions. In my opinion, it is a miracle that they develop any kind of personality and that they are capable of independent existence."

"Well, not all of them."

"Luckily for us. For me." She raised her glass in a toast. Another smile.

Lucky for whom, lucky for him, Hunt mumbled to himself, scrolling through Number Five's diary. But it was true that Vassone had been incredibly lucky to find that semi-catatonic Number 0 in that backwater psychiatric clinic. He told her nonsense about God. Did she really believe him? It was hard to say, sometimes it seemed like she would be capable of that too. In any case, she had derived a theory of thought, psychomemes, monads from that gibberish... The entire Contact Program —pulled like a rabbit out of a hat, from a single assumption made by Vassone. But you had to admit it: she was right. She was damn right, one hundred percent. It's scary. What a woman. It's like opening a genie bottle.

He called up his matchmaker's number.

IN Black's diary —stolen from his villa (along with all other memory crystals, optical and magnetic disks, and paper documents found there) by three former employees of the local law enforcement agency, hired for the task through a long chain of intermediaries, the last link of which was already completely unknown to them —the following was written in the diary:

Now I will lie. If only I knew to whom. After all, lying requires not only the liar, but —above all —the one being lied to. Who am I lying to here? Myself? What does it mean to lie to myself? No matter how many levels I descend into the subconscious, I will always end up facing the choice of lying as an involuntary error (and therefore not a lie) or premeditated forgery (and since I planned it, it is not unknown to me, so it does not even pretend to be the truth, so what kind of lie is it?).

But who exactly are diaries written for? Is there really such a big difference between the autobiographies of celebrities, published during their lifetimes and created with the intention of publishing them, and the secret notes of housewives? I know because I can compare: everyone lies. They lie to the expected reader, potential reader, or only to the reader's imagination, and often it is the imagination of oneself from the future, reading these old notes. In this sense it is possible to lie to oneself, if it is sufficiently frequent, extensive and concerns small things. For then primary memory

succumbs helplessly to secondary memory, to false recollection initiated by the lies of one's own notes from years ago. I may even remember that I wrote it not too sincerely, I may remember the intention —but I will not question everything and the written word will win in the end.

But usually there is no talk of either truth or lies. Change occurs spontaneously. I know, I know, it is no one's fault: memory is not dead. It lives its own parallel life, it lives in our heads "sideways" from the stream of time in which we ourselves move, constantly providing it with new nourishment. A moment, a view, an impression —having jumped from the real "now" to the virtual "yesterday," does not freeze forever, but evolves according to the achronological rules of memory. Our past, our childhood grows up with us, "sideways."

What remains of the truth of the naked senses in the diaries of sixty-year-olds? Before they sat down to write them down, they had to think about it for some time, that is, catalog, dust off, air out their memories. They opened and closed them, opened and closed them. Some people may actually think that they are sincere, that they are writing the truth and nothing but the truth. They will write: "I don't remember this," "I am not sure about this." The final proof will be presented, without omitting facts that are unpleasant for them and put them in a bad light —"honest to the point of pain." Indeed, when reading these memoirs, it is hard to resist the impression that this is how the authors' subconscious masochism manifests itself, some infantile inferiority complex: each unconscious modification was a change toward their oppression —each time they recalled that childish fight over a ham sandwich or a beer cap, they turned out to be more and more cowardly and contemptible. Obviously, it often goes the other way too, but then it no longer has the appearance of that psychological depth, it simply looks like impudent buffoonery and stupid self-praise.

In any case, although usually unable to realize the ongoing process of evolution of memory (I write: "we" —people), we do notice change, movement, successive metamorphoses —signs of life. It is said: "the memories have faded away." They say: "I don't remember

it clearly.” But here, it is not about the absolute disappearance of memories, but about their subconscious deformation. Because the information that is preserved is always incomplete information, it is impossible to remember the entirety of perceptual data.

My oldest image... a reminiscence of sadness: alone, I look out the big kitchen window at the snowy landscape of the construction site, and in the foreground, a sadly hunched crane. When I remember, I see it all very clearly. The streaks of dirt on the glass, and the labyrinth of excavations, footbridges, bare foundations, furrows of frozen mud, and the grayness of the winter sky spread over the housing estate, and that crane, the arm tilted crookedly, the operator’s cabin with its glass flashing. If I strained my memory, even smaller details would probably appear. I know how people “remember” things. By my very existence, I introduce objectivity into the sphere of eternal subjectivity. I know: every time I recalled that moment, it distorted the memory in my mind. The truth is left on the ropes of time. Look at any object, whatever is closest to you, a table, a chair, a plate, a pen, an LEDpad. What do you think you will remember? You see a chair; you will remember a chair. That’s right: “a chair.” If it is a piece of furniture from your apartment that has served you for a long time and you see it often, you will remember it in particular: “this chair.” The definite article of the symbol of memory defines the references: I used to eat on “this” chair, I spilled tea on “this” chair, “this” chair was bitten by a friend’s dog. But without these references, the symbol itself remains, the icon: “chair.” In an undeveloped, unremembered—inactive state—it is limited to a schematic representation of a mostly plastic or wooden structure with four legs, a seat and a backrest. Only after opening the memory does the icon—click, click—unfold, swelling in a flash with details and colors, becoming real from the context dense with a multitude of other symbols. Suddenly, the chair receives a specific color, upholstery, upholstered edges, scratches on the wood (because it turns out it is made of wood).

The past is alive, isn’t it? You transfer the thought to something else—and it will roll back into a dry skeleton of symbols. But they do not necessarily have to be the same—the same—symbols, not necessarily in the same combination, sometimes an element added in

the development, in the unconscious improvisation of the mind, is embedded and hidden in the icons; it enters the genetic pool. Doesn't evolution result from errors in copying? The same in memory: the phenotypic (broad, colorful, decorated with trinkets stolen from the storehouse of stereotypes) development of the genotype (sequence of icons) influences the original record.

Consider: books. This is also a mere symbolic record. You will rarely find descriptions of the patterns of wrinkles on the faces of the characters, the shades of their skin in the moonlight, the intonation of the voice with which they utter interrogative, declarative, imperative sentences, in laughter, anger, irritation, despair. Yet, there is no black hole, an imaginary void gaping in your imagination in this place. The development of icons occurs without your will, you do not control the selection of details added to them, realism grows at a high curve, even if you were reading the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel. Do you know this feeling —do you know this feeling when you watch a film adaptation of your favorite novel, read several times before —do you know this reflex of rejection, with which the immunology of your memory reacts to the alien, "untrue" physiognomies of the characters? Falsehood, untruth, substitution! Memory screams. It wasn't like that! I remember!

Sometimes the opposition takes on dimensions that require changing psychology to sociology. The torments of film adaptations of classics are endless. What kind of Kmicic is that from Olbrychski! They would tear Hoffman to shreds. Today —is there anyone who, reading the *Trilogy*, would see a different face under Babinicz's cap?

Why am I writing all this? To justify myself? To whom? To myself? It's easier to limit myself to that impudent statement with which I began: I will lie. Let's leave intentions aside. I remember what I remember, and there's nothing I can do about it. The percentage of objective truth contained in these memories remains today one way or another impossible to determine. It probably isn't the highest, considering my introverted nature, which makes me analyze every past event over and over again —click, click, click, click, click —another development of the icon after another of the thousand openings. Was there even a crane on this construction site?

SO what would Black have said to Dr. Vassone's elegant arguments? Would he have agreed with her? That he had a difficult childhood and that he was not like other people? A great discovery for me; of course I am not like others, I am not like people.

But what can I say about my own psychological development? What did I inherit? Only blackness, thick, greasy, stinking blackness.

My father left for the US before I was two. I know because I checked especially after they called with that false information about his accident. So I was not yet two; I did not retain any external images of him: neither facial features, nor the tone of his voice, nor the shape of his figure. What survived —blackness, because it is eternal, indestructible, indelible. When he went to school in Chicago, he tried to rape his sister, but nothing came of it, then he beat her so that she would not complain, he knocked out two of her teeth, her milk teeth. The stain kept rising to the surface through the memory of that first impotence, which had grown more and more terrible with the passing years. Women had to moan loudly for him and never, ever look him in the eye, because otherwise that fear would come back to him. Mother hated those nights, dark, silent, when he fought her in furious love, as one fights a dog that refuses to submit to the rigors of leash and muzzle. His hot hands, his breath like the wheezing of a dying man. His despair, her contempt. I wasn't even two years old.

Black, black, black covering everything. Mother. Bone from bone? Dollar from dollar. She would come and stand over the incubus, stand there for minutes, motionless. Me inside: a dark tangle of short limbs, a big head, a spiral of an artificial umbilical cord. Turn off the power. Hit me with a stool, throw me on the floor. I don't want to, I don't want to, I don't want to. It was a stupid, hopelessly stupid idea, he'll leave anyway, I'll be left without money, and with this on my back. God, where were the times when you could actually catch a guy who was screwed for a child! Now they're all sterile there. What are you going to do, what are you humiliating him for before he signs the contract! Then he'll run away anyway. What good is it to me? Switch it off, smash it; you're not sculpted anyway, so I won't lose much. May the Devil take you, you fucking parasite. Of course she knew she wouldn't really do anything like that —but she imagined it. As I floated out in dark liquids onto the carpet, Black, black flooding everything.

Their hatred; and what was in between. Some small sadisms, satisfactions of pain. Day after day, night after night, for weeks, months. An ocean of blackness. At that time, probably limited in my experiences and experiences of experiences, I couldn't expect anything else —but that didn't have to be the rule at all, the two of them weren't the whole world.

But that's the rule. All these people... hundreds, thousands... Children in kindergarten and children in school, and teachers, and passers-by on the streets, shop assistants, and policemen, priests, drunkards, whores, workers, drivers in cars, tenants in apartments, patients in hospitals, prisoners in jails and prisons, soldiers on leave. They swim in my head, carried away by waves of blackness, bouncing off each other, mixing, dissolving.

Small things, big things, thousands, tens of thousands, immeasurable abysses, blackness, blackness, an ocean of blackness.

With the first million I won in poker, I bought this villa in the country, far from other houses, amidst fields and forests. But there too: passengers from cars moving along the road, some lost hikers, farmers on their way to or from the fields. So I preferred nights. I slept during the day. After sunset, however, after sunset, I gained that semblance of peace, quiet, and solitude that is generally available on the surface of the planet, beyond the possibility of being crowded with people and their mental secretions. A semblance of solitude, or freedom. No one nearby, no other thoughts, no impressions of another's body, no pain in their stomachs, no wind in their hair, no sweat on their skin, no saliva in their mouths, maybe sometimes the hot darkness of a mole, the hard air under a bird's wings, the swaying world of a cat. But still —salvation. The locals began to tell tall tales about me: a vampire, a gangster, a Satanist, a pederast, he kidnaps children. To keep the legend alive, I dressed in dark colors. They thought and said about me: Black, that Black. Once, when a boy went missing, the police even came. It was this policeman who had kidnapped and killed the boy. The body was never found. But apart from that —peace. I put a telescope on the roof. This far from the city, on cloudless nights you can see the smallest wrinkles on the face of the sky.

”IT’S Mr. Hunt himself, the honorable, the honored.”
 “Oh, I see you’re in a good mood.”

“Shouldn’t you be? I’m looking forward to this fun. I can’t wait: what kind of whip will you pull out on me?”

“A whip? Why do I need a whip? Believe it or not, your predecessors cooperated voluntarily.”

“As I understand it, they were also kidnapped with their consent. Or maybe I was the only one who ended up here this way? What do you mean, I fell from the Moon? You’re probably a trained psychologist with hard training in negotiations, you probably have my dossier there, they’ve already written up analyses —maybe not? I’d be surprised if Hunt was your real name. Maybe you don’t have a name at all. Maybe you’re just an electronic mask of some hired specialist: your face, a collection of pixels. Maybe you’re an expert Turing machine.”

“Damn it, if I tell you to calm down now, you’ll only get madder... You see what kind of negotiator I am.”

“I won’t get mad. You know I won’t.”

“Oh? Thank you for your promise. Hmm, please listen to me. I realize that this is unlawful, that it’s a crime, and in general —an international disgrace. But there’s no choice here, these are the mechanisms of politics, economy. That’s right, I’m just justifying myself. We’re not the only ones looking for telepaths. We know about the Chinese, the French, three economic alliances from the South, we also suspect the Germans and the Indians.”

“So what? They’re SS men, and you’re angels? Have these four in before me gone brainless from some unearthly ecstasy? You’re catching guinea pigs, that’s what you do.”

“Yes, but there’s no alternative here. They’d kill you. Or we would kill you. Not ours, not theirs. I know that when you’re a victim, it sounds like a religion of comic book villains —but it’s the truth. What can I do? Who opposes gravity?”

“Let’s forget about these thin excuses. I’m still waiting for you to wave that whip in front of my eyes.”

“I say that there is no whip, and there will be no whip.”

“So what, do you think I’ll agree of my own free will? What is this, Stockholm

syndrome? Jokes aside.”

“What do you have better to do? Are you going to spend all day contemplating the view of Earth?”

“So it’s boring? Is that what it’s about? That I can’t handle it mentally?”

“You still don’t understand. This isn’t even about any conscious actions on your part. It will come to you by itself. There, in orbit, in absolute emptiness, in the absence of alien minds and thoughts... It’s only a matter of time. Or maybe you’ve already started to sense it? What? Some flashes, delicate touches, strange garbage inside your own thoughts—inexplicable now that no one is interfering with you. What? Has anything like this happened before?”

“.....”

“.....”

“Horses. Sand.”

“That’s the Fourth. That’s his. He...He had a stud farm.”

“What’s this all about? Why did you kidnap me? Because you didn’t say so.”

“I’m telling you. ...You see? You want to know yourself.”

“What is it? Is that what got the others?”

“I’m telling you. Please listen.”

AFTER his three-hour session with Number Five, Hunt was so exhausted that he left without another word and drove home.

Home. Just another rented apartment. He camped here as he had in the Watergate apartment: a hotel, a stopover on a road to nowhere.

It was the penultimate floor of a former office building in Manhattan. After the explosive development of electronic communications and the popularization of “remote” work systems, most of the local glass skyscrapers were deserted. The city government did not want to allow the center to collapse and turn

into a common slum, so it ordered the buildings to be transformed into luxury residential houses, mega apartments.

From the window of Hunt's living room, there was a panoramic view of New York burning with cold colors at night. It was not the same as a skyhouse, but still, a divine perspective. The trembling movement of distant lights put you to sleep after a few minutes of staring at it.

Hunt sat on the arm of the chair, mechanically picked up an apple from the table, tossed it a few times, took a bite. The city fascinated him. Vassone's theory took root deep in his brain. He could not shake off the film associations. That monstrous human anthill... twenty-three million people, twenty-three million minds... He tried to read the encrypted messages from the movements of the light particles. Like impulses along neurons. Like the dance of bees. Of course, there was more poetry in this than truth; Marina would have sneered at such primitive approximations without hesitation.

He put down the bitten fruit. The apartment was luxurious, spacious, brightly lit, the emptiness was humming. He was glad that he was tired enough to just lie down and fall asleep. He hated staying in these rooms that he was forced to call home. It felt like a desecrated temple of a benevolent deity. Even after symbolically turning on the legal insurance network, he didn't know what exactly he should do, how to behave, which algorithm to fall into. His private solitude was driving him crazy due to the lack of appropriate conventions and rules of the game.

The doorman called to let him know about an unexpected guest.

"Who?" Hunt asked into the signet ring.

"Mr. Matthew Green, of the law firm of Rosemont, Rosemont & Dejean."

"What kind of business did he say?"

"He said it was private business."

"Send him up."

Green turned out to be a gray-haired pheno-african in an old-fashioned suit (he even had a tie!).

Hunt activated the wiretapping and legal insurance surveillance network and opened the door for him. They bowed, shook hands, exchanged business cards.

Hunt led the guest into the drawing room.

“Drink?”

“No, thank you. Am I really not disturbing you?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I am not disturbing your peace?”

“No.”

“I am not offending your feelings?”

“No.”

“I am not, therefore, allowed to tell you what business I am here for.”

“I am listening attentively.”

Green calmly crossed his legs, smoothed his jacket, and, politely looking away from Hunt, said:

“I was hired by a certain person who wanted to investigate the possibility of a closer acquaintance with you, Mr. Hunt. Should I go on, or is the subject of no interest to you?”

“I’m listening, I’m listening”

“I assume, then, that there are no legal obstacles to such an acquaintance.”

“I am not aware of any.”

“Excellent. If you were to accept my client’s proposal, would a meeting tomorrow at seven in the evening at ‘De Aunche’ suit you?”

“Absolutely.”

“All costs, of course, listed separately.”

“Of course.”

Green nodded, reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, took out a white envelope and placed it on the table between his and Hunt's armchairs, arranging the white rectangle exactly in the middle of the tabletop, symmetrically to the edge. Then he stood up.

"I have to say goodbye now. Please forgive me for leaving you, but..."

"I understand, I understand."

"Once again, on behalf of my client and myself, I want to assure you that this offer is completely non-binding and that you do not have to respond to it at all."

"Yes, yes, I understand."

"If you perceive my action as a form of pressure, the law firm is prepared to pay you the customary compensation."

"Yes, I know."

Exchanging formulas, they reached the door and said their goodbyes quickly. Green left, Hunt switched off the network.

He returned to the living room, took the half-eaten apple and, tearing its flesh with his teeth, opened the envelope Green had left behind. The note read: "Marina Vassone."

He laughed and called up his matchmaker's number.

"Cancel it," he said. "I'm running late."

Hunt told himself that he didn't like these rituals —probably no one did, not even those brought up in them from childhood —but it wasn't a matter of preference, but of financial necessity: he couldn't afford to ignore them. Besides, no one could, except those who had nothing to lose. New Etiquette, like the etiquette of all times, concerned mainly the elites. In this era —which didn't make it any different —the elites defined themselves by the state of their bank accounts.

There were no grand laws, sudden revolutions, specific resolutions, nothing like that Nicholas couldn't remember. It happened gradually, by a quiet accumulation of court precedents and legal customs. A hundred and fifty years ago

—who would have thought of taking a woman to court for smiling at a man he passed on the street? He had watched films from that era, so he had a comparison (although he was aware that art always extremized). “This wasn’t that sphere at all, the field of law began a few kilometers away. But as its competitors lost their importance, it took over the abandoned territory. Since you know no other rules and do not profess any other principles, you will profess mine,” says Themis, who is blind and must grope around with her heavy, clumsy fingers to see anything.

So since everyone is a potential enemy and one too honest word can cost you your entire life’s work in a court of law, it is better to stay away. No one told Nicholas this in those words, but that was the meaning of the canons of his upbringing, the uncodifiable rules of coexistence with which he had been subconsciously formatted.

In public places, there was a rigid code of acceptable behavior, defining what words and gestures could in no way be interpreted as an invasion of another’s privacy. Nicholas —like all children —got to know it long before he understood its source and purpose. Few people, however, investigate the logical basis of every traffic regulation. However, certain automatic reflexes are created. Hunt watched films from past eras and realized that he would not be able to behave in the way people behaved then, neither toward women, nor even toward men, and certainly not toward children.

However, all this did not protect against false accusations. This is where the idea of legal insurance came from: constant monitoring of all premises. It also did not suddenly pop out of the head of any technocrat. It developed gradually from a network of guards and burglar alarms, and above all from extensive CCTV networks. Because already in the aughts, more than half of public areas in megacities, as well as in independent suburban zones, were covered by constant monitoring by closed-circuit TV cameras. Even in the 20th century, the FBI invested heavily in a program to miniaturize them. The infrastructure was therefore ready and just waiting to be used. Not for long, by the way. You can always count on lawyers.

The CCTV signal went directly to the notary’s computers, and all installations and connections were regularly checked by teams of sworn technicians. Legal insurance networks had been a universally binding canon for years, Hunt’s entire life had taken place in front of the cameras, and Nicholas sincerely praised

the sense of security and certainty of form they guaranteed.

Where are those days of romantic love — Hunt sighed inwardly, however, as he immersed himself in a hot bath — where are those sudden infatuations, kisses stolen in passing, ambiguous conversations, quick sex in the elevator, girls laughing freely in the morning sun, curvy street temptresses — where did all that go? It survived only in films, in books. Today, when you fall in love, when you really fall madly in love, you call an online psychoanalyst as soon as possible, because otherwise you're done for: you'll do something stupid and ruin your life.

But he was aware that this was just a pretense. If he really had a choice, he wouldn't change a thing. In a sense, he was still an aristocrat: the system satisfied him.

VASSONE was sitting on the balcony of her hotel suite, reading Black's diary.

I don't remember the first few hundred exactly. She called by mistake. That's how she started to explain herself: I'm-sorry, a mistake. I was at the telescope, her voice murmuring to me to the rhythm of a pulsar's flashes. "It doesn't matter," I said to the ring, "but how on earth did you manage to get it wrong?" "Because I'm calling from my grandmother's old, dial-type telephone, I don't know how to use it very well, I must have dialed it wrong." Then I ask about her grandmother, and she tells a funny story about the old lady's many-year fight with a nasty neighbor who kept a dog that barked very loudly and didn't let her grandmother sleep. You can hear some absent-mindedness in the girl's voice, sadness chased away by words — she would probably babble like that to whoever she called. "What happened?" I ask. "Oh, you see, she's dying."

"I'm so sorry," I mumble. "She's dying, dying, dying" the girl bursts out "I've been stuck here with her for three weeks now, it's unbearable!" "Oh, and you decided to have some fun with teleconfession?" "What's that?" "Haven't you heard? The next step in the evolution of party phones: if you want to talk to someone anonymously, and you can't afford an analyst, you call a company that randomly selects a person for you. You don't know their number, they don't know yours; upon request, the company will

connect you again. You can be completely honest with each other, you'll never meet, you'll never know, because —and herein lies the revolutionary nature of the undertaking —the company's Turing machine monitors your conversations and forestalls any attempts to pass on identifying information. After all, isn't it all about just that:

a pretext for articulating your thoughts! They aren't specific until they're spoken, and only when you hear the words describing your feelings from your own mouth do you really get to know them? You

need a pretext for a monologue. Teleconfessions provide it. You speak into the air, the air answers. There is nothing to be afraid of,

you can trust the void. Haven't you really heard?" "No. But something like that would be useful to me." "Well, please speak up,

I have time." I told the computer to aim the telescope at the moon's disk. Her breathing whispered in my ear. I don't remember all those words exactly, hers and mine, it probably wasn't like that,

my memory must have falsified a lot in the meantime —but the general impression was probably (probably!) true. "I don't really know what to say" she whispered. "Does death scare you?" "Scare

you? Whose death, hers?" "No, death in general." "You mean: mine?" "No. Death as a phenomenon. That something like that is even possible. The spirit leaves the body, a dream without a second end, loss of consciousness with the awareness of the impossibility of return. One short look at saying goodbye to the whole world. Then only flesh and bones and blood, and it no longer has a name, it is no

one's father, no one's brother. The brain is a pile of neurons.

Darkness, silence, no sensations, just a few lost echoes of pain, collateral tensions —and that's it, entropy." "You speak as if you yourself had already died." "Oh, because that's how it is, that's how

it is." "You're joking." "No way. Do you know what it means to receive other people's thoughts? It doesn't mean: to hear the words mumbled in their heads. It doesn't mean: to watch their memories

as if on a screen. It means: to be them. To be. If you feel cold —then in a sense you are that drunk freezing in a snowdrift. What

else defines us, if not mental and physical sensations? So also death." "Wait a minute... you say you are this, um, telepath?" "I can be whoever you want over the phone." "But you were serious!"

"Uh, I was kidding you." "What the hell, don't be silly! Tell me honestly now if it is this true? Can you hear me? Hello? Is this true?

I'm not joking and I don't want you to be joking." "But what good is my word to you, I'm just a voice on the phone, I don't exist for you, I can feed you any lies." "Yes. But precisely because I'm just a voice on the phone..." "You can afford it. I want to know." "In any case, I managed to distract you from your dying grandmother, right?" "For God's sake, tell me: is this true?" "Yes." I hung up.

Somehow I missed the fact that this wasn't a real teleconfession. She must have remembered the number she wanted to call. Two nights later, she found me, laboriously trying all possible combinations. That's how it all started. She wanted to talk. So we talked. The first question was whether I could "feel" her too. I would throw away my phone if I did. So I don't like it? No, I don't. Why? She began to probe. It's fascinating, after all: knowing other people's thoughts, feelings, bodies. Yes, I tell her, but since you know them, they are no longer "other people," and the whole thing looks more like a complicated case of schizophrenia than telepathy as people imagine it from movies and books. Over the phone? Not over the phone. You're real, I can talk to you —because you're a stranger. So on and so forth. At that time, I was more of an interesting zoological specimen to her, a curiosity to be admired in silent delight and horror. She was so uninhibited in her inquiries because, in fact, she didn't believe me, she couldn't believe me. In the end, it turned into a real teleconfession bond: she called almost every night, to talk about the day, to confide in me, to confess. Then her grandmother finally died. But she didn't stop calling. She went back to her place, got down to work on some demographic analysis program ordered by Brussels. She started calling me her friend. She told me things about herself that I hadn't asked about at all, she could talk for an hour straight, jumping from topic to topic, making immediate introspections and explaining her own reactions. I didn't have to say a word. In fact, all she needed was to know that someone was listening. She had a steady lover, although without a written agreement. She didn't tell him about me, but she told me about him until dawn. Oh, no inhibitions when the other person is a stranger forever! What a wonderful invention, these teleconfessions. You are my guardian angel, you are my nightly confidant, Black. Then her lover left her. You are my only friend, Black. What does the word

"friend" mean today? A quiet breath on the other end of the line? Is true closeness possible only in absolute distance? An acquaintance in ignorance? Love in indifference? Those were depressing nights.

They didn't accept her program. The landlord raised the rent. A Caucasian bee, one of those post-radiation mutants, stung her on the shoulder: it swelled up so terribly that no clothes would fit for several days. She spoke in detail. What kind of life is this, my God,

no one to open my mouth to, and why wait until next week. If it weren't for you, Black, I would have shot myself with a Kevorkian. I gave some soothing words. But when she finally came to herself, she

became even more dangerous. "I see clearly now," she declared firmly. "I love you, Black. Not to make a mistake, I won't give up. I know this is an unlisted number. I'll borrow money, hire a detective agency, they'll find you." "Don't do that." "It's fate. You are the meaning of my life. You are the best, the wisest man I've ever met."

"Don't be stupid, you can't fall in love with a voice in your ear." "How do you know that? You say yourself that you've never loved."

"But I was the one who thought they were loved." "Don't come near me, please. Blackness will flood us." "It's hard to find another pessimist like that. I don't believe in your blackness. People aren't completely and utterly evil." Is that evil? Am I saying that it's evil?

"Are you afraid that I'll come and you'll look into my thoughts."

"Yes. You can't like someone you feel disgust for." "Is that what you feel for people? Disgust? People disgust you? Jesus Christ, Black, you should get treatment, it's a mental illness." "Well, exactly. Give up on the lunatic." "I wouldn't dream of it." "Please, don't do that." "I won't give up." Indeed, she didn't. She thought about it for a day and presented her idea the next evening. "I know how to get over it" she said. "Now, over the phone, before we meet

face to face, now I myself will tell you all my secrets, darkest secrets, my worst memories. I will defuse this bomb once and for all." She was so determined that my pleas and explanations were of no use. How well I know—from "personal experience"—that the characteristic state of sublime blindness, conviction of one's own reasons combined with a noble readiness for self-sacrifice. It never occurs to the young to look for manifestations of cold egoism in this, they consider themselves half-angels of love, they will sacrifice their careers, devote their lives, sacrifice everything—for another person,

selflessly. They often live in this illusion for years. Love, love, love. Then egoism points them in a different direction —and suddenly it turns out that it was a mistake, that there are certain conditions, that from the beginning this relationship was a kind of transactional exchange. Isn't that what happened to her lover? But she still doesn't understand. There's no cure for that. You can go through it countless times and you won't gain immunity. They can explain and explain it to you —it doesn't get through. It's a psychological idiom.

Impossible to translate. A one-way mirror: you can see from the outside, but not from the inside. Your own reflection deceives you. "They came in while I was masturbating," she whispered in my ear.

"I thought I'd kill myself. So that they'd at least joke about it! So that they'd laugh at me! But no. Just those looks, those faces, as if I were a leper. What are they, saints?" She whispered: "I wanted to take a pillow and strangle her. It was unbearable. She stank. Nights and days she wheezed like a chased horse, such mucus dripped from her nose, saliva from her mouth, I had to wipe it off. She did it to herself. I had to wash her. Do you, Black, have any idea...? A few days like that are enough to make you doubt the existence of any beauty in the world, to forget about joy. It's a pity that this euthanasia law doesn't apply in our land. It's inhumane, how can you allow such abomination. That's it, I already had a pillow in my hands. You see, I see a sin in it. I don't understand. It comes back and comes back. You'll definitely see when I come. That's why I called then. I had to call someone, because I would have done it, I really would have done it, Black, I know I would." She whispered:

"It went on for three months, he treated me like a slave, like a whore, he would enter me like he would at a brothel, but I didn't see anything, I loved him, Jesus, how I loved him. He had that lady from Zakopane and that red-headed slut. He didn't even want to deny it! I was so young and stupid, I took it personally, I thought that was how it was. How I despised myself...! You have no idea how it torments me, to this day I get angry and blush at the memory."

So on and so forth, the blackness seeped into my mind on the waves of her voice. There was no point in her ruining herself on detectives

—I gave her my address myself. I asked that she come at night night, and she came at night. I waited under the porch. She parked a dozen or so meters away, the gravel crunched under the tires of

the slowly rolling Luuca, the crickets were louder. She got out —and that was too close. Oh, he's not as handsome as I imagined. Well, what a gloomy face, a face as if frozen. Smile. Eee. Well, girl, suck in your stomach, puff your chest. Won't you move? He didn't even blink. Let's put on a good face, let's put on a good face. "You don't have to try so hard" I told her. "What's your problem?" she frowned, stopping a step away from me. Her thoughts flooded me with a waterfall of dirt. Fear: and what if I was really a telepath, and how it reads, how it sees, how it feels...? And: what am I doing here, I didn't know it. And: not to think about that, just not to think about that. That: her sexual fantasies when she was driving here. Myself abstracted with the faces of her lovers, rituals of humiliation, childhood reminiscence, peace in her father's arms.

"I'm not your father," I said. She choked. Fear, fear, fear. Involuntarily —a step back. Blackness bursts in a dark fountain, suddenly I am flooded with images, voices, sensations and feelings, kaleidoscopic thoughts, torn and glued together according to associations alien to me. Black, black. What I don't want to think about, what I try to hide —so with this very act of negation I summon them from my disorganized memory. What do words mean, they mean nothing. She told me —but now I am the despised one, the humiliated one, I stand over my grandmother with a pillow in my hands, I surrender, drunk, to the caresses of an anonymous lover with vodka breath, I lie to my parents, I steal money from my friends... even to tell everything, she did not have the strength or faith. Now I look at myself, I look into my eyes, and I see this knowledge, I see unity, this is a human being, and he knows, he knows everything about me, he is me, he looks, he looks...! Terror —but above all: shame, shame so monstrous that it even suppresses rage at itself. What to do, hands are shaking, thoughts are shaking, son of a bitch, who gave you the right... I can't, I can't! She turned around, ran to the car, drove away. I don't know if all this lasted even a minute. I returned to the telescope, to the stars, which are so beautiful —because infinitely distant, unreachable.

After that she called only once, about a week later. "Now I know what love isn't," she said.

A beep in her earring went off and Dr. Vassone put down the LEDpad. She squeezed her ring.

"I gave him the offer. He didn't refuse in advance. Here's a confirmation of the transfer of the fee. Thank you."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you."

Almost immediately the earring went off again.

"Mom?"

"Is that you, Jason?"

"You were supposed to say something."

"Oh, sorry, I forgot again, didn't I?"

"Are you okay now? Is it over? Tell me the truth."

"It's over, it's over. Don't worry, it's nothing."

"Don't worry!" Jason exploded. "Have you seen your face? They said you did this to yourself! What have you gotten yourself into? Maybe you caught something from your nutcases, huh?"

"You're revolutionizing psychiatry, Jason. What do these germs of mental illness look like?"

"Yeah. Sorry I called. Bye."

"Jason! Damn it, don't be mad. Listen, I was really happy you were sitting there with me, really, it's a shame we don't meet more often."

"You're right about that. The phone forces insincerity. But whose fault is that? You went back to Boston and didn't even give me a call. If it wasn't for that accident, we probably wouldn't have met at all. If we did, what would we talk about? About money. About my grades. About your secrets."

"What do you want to talk about?"

“About what? Well...”

“You see.”

“My God, we’re not even friends anymore.”

“You’re my son, my only child.”

“Do I have a mark on my forehead? Call me if you go crazy again.” He hung up.

What is it about psychotherapists, psychologists, psychiatrists —they have the hardest time getting along with people, staying in some kind of stable relationship, arranging their life...?

She walked from the balcony into the interior of the apartment, turned to the bar. It was interesting, she thought, for Number Five and the others, getting close to another person means a threat to their personality —and aren’t we gradually becoming like them? She poured herself some rum, took a sip.

Is there anything left to “process?” Are implants the next step? Entire communities made up of implanted individuals living their lives outside the real world, in simulated OVR spaces? Implants installed in the prenatal phase, children born with their senses open to virtual reality, but plugged to the the extra-computer reality —so no eyes, no ears, no sense organs necessary, no biological brain interface called the body. You develop from the zygote in an incubus and you will remain there, there will be no moment of birth, after all, the incubus will provide your body with everything it needs for a long, safe existence. Is this a correct extrapolation —a fulfillment of those claustrophobic visions straight from outdated SF?

What the hell? What am I drinking? Rum? I never liked rum...!

Mmm... at least it tastes good.

A Spider at Night

RONALD SCHATZ arrived at Central early in the morning. He had only managed to leave his luggage at the hotel on the way from the airport. On the way to the top floor of the building, the elevator informed him that he was to report to room number 12, to Mr. Anselm Preslawny. Stepping out into the empty corridor, he followed the room numbers for a moment with his eyes (the Central computer clearly did not have an A-V doorman interface). The corridor was empty and quiet.

He stopped in front of door number 12, waited a suitable amount of time and entered. From behind a desk covered with cardboard boxes, a sculpted blonde glared at him. Schatz had now encountered Anselm in the worst possible mood.

"Are you that Monad Wars smartass?" Preslawny snapped at him. "Okay, I have something here just right for homegrown geniuses. Catch this." Ronald instinctively caught the disk.

"Hey, wait a minute, how about a good morning first, a coffee, a cigarette..."

"We're not online, they're afraid of the notary machines being hacked here. So get out of here."

"So, are politeness and good manners now only dependent on the legal insurance network?" Ronald allowed himself a bit of irritation, as much as the situation required.

"What were you thinking?" Preslawny shut him down. "So what are you sticking around for, are your shoes stuck or something? I don't know what you

were thinking —that a few words of recommendation from Bronstein would make you such a big shot that we'd fall to our knees at the sight of you? It says here" he jabbed his finger somewhere between the boxes, "that you've been assigned to work. This is not a tour of a chocolate factory. Get to work, because I'll make sure that when you leave, you get a review that will make them doubt your DNAM."

Schatz had no choice but to obey Anselm's instructions. His words hurt all the more because they reflected Ronald's actual attitude, who, after several weeks of behind-the-scenes machinations, had obtained access to the Team's reports and boldly developed the theory of The Monadic Wars, was already certain of a fast and spectacular career. He had waited long enough for an official assignment to the Team! Meanwhile, what? Some miserable assistant of Hunt's was tormenting him!

Schatz was assigned a small, windowless room on the upper floor of the Central Office. Schatz entered, closed the door behind him, sat down at the desk, turned on the computer —and here he was overcome with anger, at them and at himself, and even more at himself, because in his own eyes he came across as a stupid greenhorn, an infantile romantic. Injured pride, no doubt. The feeling itself was in fact somewhat childish —but nevertheless very useful, strongly motivating. Psychoanalysts explained it to him in great detail: build on flaws, on dark sides, greed, lust for domination, egoism, they will not let you down. But be consistent in this and do not be a hypocrite.

He inserted Anselm's disk into the drive. A dozen or so sentences, nothing more. An order for a report on mass madness, sects and their derivatives, suicides, hauntings, religious trends. A holistic approach, synthesis and proposed explanations were requested.

And a paragraph signed by Anselm:

This is for N. Hunt. Do not pack gigas of data and bibliography listings. Do not be influenced by the Contact Program and the rest. Do not be influenced by anything. An open mind, new ideas and so on; is standard. There have already been studies on this subject, many studies, so it takes a lot to beat. This is not supposed to be a scientific paper: Hunt wants something as a cushion.

Hunt wants something for a cushion! Hunt wants something for a cushion! Schatz almost got screwed over. Beautiful, simply magnificent! What a dizzying promotion! The court storyteller of the Mandarin! Bastards. He won't hang copies of his diplomas here, no. Who do they think I am? Haven't they read my work on the Wars? I'll give them something, I'll show them something, their brains will burn!

So he fueled himself, pumped adrenaline into himself with rage and self-humiliation —until he crossed the threshold and instantly cooled down, calmed down, relaxed, his thoughts became crystal-symmetrical and clear, cleansed of all animal emotions.

He squinted painfully and whispered the password. The implant activated in the default sight mode of one-sensory half-blindness.

Most of the Implanted, once they turned it on, never left OVR, although they usually hid all supermanifestations to avoid disorientation, limiting themselves to the utility MUI —but Ronald made it a point of honor not to allow such an addiction.

He preferred classic, very limited visualizations. He entered OVR. The manager automatically logged him on the nearest open server, in this case —the Teams lightning-fast Animo 4.

Of course, there were no Matrices, no Metaverses, Cyberworlds. It is true that Microsoft tried to force users to connect to its Palace *en masse* deliberately specializing its software so narrowly —but subsequent versions of its systems crashed, each with twice as many bugs, and despite the great offensive of the company's memetic engineers, the snobbish memotrend of contempt for MSMiazgi was not broken. Therefore, there was no single global standard for OVR visualization.

However, the war of protocols was ongoing. The post-Linux CIOTs, which were well on their way to achieving the former position of HTTP, were victorious. Customizing In/Out Transfer Protocol —and Ronald used its last mutation —allowed implants to perfectly adapt the MUI format to the current throughput of HFT connections, the size of the implant's RAM, and the degree of congestion on the star/server. The first Hamabas were not very capable of much, so most

of the work had to be done on servers, which resulted in almost unrealistic bandwidth requirements. However, this was not such a problem at the time, because the total number of people who were orthovirtualized remained low.

Schatz was among these pioneers. From the very beginning, he focused on implants, he knew that this was the future. While still a student, he took out a loan for a series of microtrepanation operations and the implantation of nanonetworks of cortical neural stimulants—he was still paying it off. From a purely financial point of view, it was a terrible mistake, because over the course of a dozen or so years, the technology had become widespread and implantation had become a routine procedure that would not even dent Schatz's budget today. But Ronald saw it differently: he had caught the last carriage of the train to a new era, and indeed few of his generation had made it. Implants were a technological distinguishing feature of a social phase transition that Schatz had sensed a decade earlier. That was his talent: visionary induction on a civilizational scale. He knew very well that behind his back he was called "Krasnov's son" (for some it sounded almost like "Son of Sam"), and he was not even angry. The text about the Monad Wars was just the latest example; earlier Ronald had "predicted" among other things the political and cultural implications of the IEW escalation they were currently witnessing.

He was no longer even surprised by the positive verifications of his own predictions. He personally became convinced over time that some subsurface mechanisms of his mind were involved in the process of their creation, of which neither he nor his psychoanalysts nor his designers were aware.

Schatz's upgraded Hamaba had the memory to independently maintain and calculate in real time the six-sense sensorium (hearing-sight-touch-smell-taste-labium). In the normal mode, only CIOT-cut packages were loaded from the network: variable update packages and (rarely) full environment files. Thanks to this, Schatzu could smoothly enter full interactive blindness even during rush hour in the heart of NYC.

Ronald's default MUI was completely transparent. He had macros attached to his eye muscles. Schatzu squinted at the upper left corner of his office. A sheet of LEDsilk (OVR only) unfurled and stiffened from the ceiling, and an emulator of an ancient 2D stage was launched on this screen.

Growling brief commands into the OVR (the manager, like a good Victorian butler, after so many years recognized his master's whims from the slight twitch

of his facial muscles), he launched his browser, set up according to a vague thematic code, then sorted the files found by date and selected one of the most recent. It was a record of a "crime scene" prepared by the LAPD in the standard A-V mode for the police, agencies and government institutions.

The rooms covered by a two-sensory construct were scanned thoroughly enough to allow for a certain freedom in the way the data was recreated: Schatz could move freely around the apartment, move objects, open furniture, crouch and jump. Such scans had been admissible evidence in courts for several months, and the police hired specialist companies to prepare them.

"Help," Schatz mumbled, pacing back and forth around the room several times.

A girl's half-naked body materialized on the bed under a DeVonne's holoposter.

Humphrey Bogart emerged from the wall. He touched the brim of his hat with his fingers, took a cigarette from his coat pocket, lit one, and took a drag.

"Kevorkian-based chemical barbiturate," he said. "She was found by her ex-boyfriend. She didn't leave a letter, but there is something like a diary. Confirmed long-term contact with the Saviors of the World. AT&T provided her phone billing, in the last month almost ten hours with psychoanalysts online. The medic refused to let us see their saves. Autopsy revealed nothing new. Interviews of the Saviors through their juridictor —pending. Current hypothesis: suicide after a nervous breakdown with religious motives. Questions? Personal data?"

"Go underneath."

Bogart smiled and disappeared, but the cigarette smoke remained: the application was still running.

Schatz settled more comfortably in the armchair and approached the body of the suicidal girl. Taking one's own life shouldn't be so easy, he thought. Ninety percent of those who decide to depart forever into the land of ecstatic dreams by swallowing pills with a guaranteed effect by specialists would give up if they had to hang themselves on a cable, jump from a bridge or the roof of a high-rise building, or vulgarly slit their wrists. The aestheticization and pleasure of the

act of suicide has seriously lowered the threshold of determination necessary to commit it; today, any argument with a boss, a momentary depression is enough. No wonder that people have simply been brainwashed kill themselves. Saviors of the World... At least that's a reason.

After death, she was very beautiful, beautiful with that asymmetrical beauty of the era of individual genetic sculpture. He touched her cheek. Of course, he felt nothing, his fingers passed through fog (A-V: sound and image). She was lying with her hands tangled in thick, jet-black hair, her hands were placed at the height of her head. An piercing in her left nipple. He looked at it —nothing original: a snake swallowing its tail.

"Memoir," said Schatzu.

The cigarette smoke formed a wedge that pointed under the bookshelf. Ronald leaned over and "picked up" the notebook. It had been scanned very carefully, you could turn the pages. He found the latest entries. Mostly poems, very few daily statistics.

Although all this would be of little use to him for that synthesizing report for Hunt (if at all), Schatz always started with the details, he started on a micro scale. Hence this virtual visit to the fresh victim of the trend he was supposed to diagnose. I have to get a taste, he used to say. What right would he have to design yachts if he had never been on a single cruise?

This method of in-depth Einsicht could be very exhausting, time-consuming and sometimes led him astray —nevertheless, it gave Ronald an invaluable sense of participation, of internalizing the trend, which was necessary for Schatz's subconscious to get going at all.

He jumped straight to the last written page of the diary. The girl's handwriting was well-developed, the shape of the letters and the style of tying the lines brought to mind nineteenth-century calligraphy, a real rarity in the age of dictaphone word processors. She must have been calm when she wrote this. It's not even a fountain pen, just a regular pen. Such beautiful character.

idea juggler

field agent of transcendence

traveling salesman of salvation
peddler of the absolute
always a lot of business activity
Apocalypse tomorrow
Money today
crazy bonuses for harmful working conditions
theodicy after hours

on your knees child
humble yourself
I know
I know everything
trust me
believe me
I won't lie to you
this is the Truth
this is the Falsehood
it's striking in the eyes
sharp and straight dividing line
mistakes excluded
in the event of a complaint, the soul is guaranteed to be returned

but
after leaving
after leaving with
after leaving in
complaints are not considered yes child
yes child
we all have to go
look me in the eye
here hold
this last bullet for you
aim well
pray well
i am with you

ANSELM greeted Hunt with the same humor as Ronald.

"What's gotten into you? Did you say something stupid again?"

"Oh" Anselm groaned. "They're sending me to the Hacienda."

"What?"

"I'm flying out tomorrow."

"Where did that come from?"

"Don't even ask, it's the colonel's work, I can feel it."

"Where is he?"

"At your place."

Colonel Fortzhauser was talking on the phone. In civilian clothes, he looked like a cop from a gang-ridden neighborhood, or worse. He was the same age as Hunt, but his DNA wasn't as well-sculpted and the first wrinkles were already appearing on his face. While talking on the phone, he whispered, covering his mouth with his hand wearing the signet ring.

"What's this about Preslawny?"

Fortzhauser, having ended the conversation, was silent for a moment, then shrugged (one of the few European memogeists successfully copied into the American culture sphere).

"Don't you think Preslawny will be more useful at the Hacienda?" he mumbled.

"Who's the boss here?"

"You're not sure?"

"Is this revenge?"

"For what?"

"Do you have to keep answering questions with questions?"

"Or what?"

Hunt left, slamming the door.

Anselm Preslawny was finishing packing. He was emptying the drawers of his desk into two plastic boxes. He sang an aria from "Pajaca." Surprisingly, he didn't sing off-key.

"Do you want to? I'll appeal," Hunt suggested.

"To whom?"

"Good question."

"I know it's a good question. You'll give me a good answer."

"A good question, because no one knows the answer to it."

"Right? I would give a lot to finally find out who we really belong to."

Indeed, even Hunt himself, although the nominal director of the program, did not know who exactly he was subordinate to and what his place in the power structure was (because there was one, everything has its place in it). The Team's budget came—for now—partly from the Defense Intelligence Agency's black budget, partly from subtle shifts in the Hacienda's budget, but mainly—from a one-time grant from the Economic Defense Corps (which to some extent explained Fortzhauser's audacity). Statutorily, like the Hacienda, the Team was an agency of DARPA. Reports on The Team's work was subject to a confidentiality scale, and the visits were mainly made by second-line Washington officials. Hunt owed his own nomination only to a few debts of gratitude from high-ranking bureaucrats. Nicholas, however, was used to it: never, throughout his career, had he expected or encountered situations, tasks, and subordinations that were completely unambiguous.

So now he could perfectly imagine the mechanics of Anselm's transfer. Hunt had taken Anselm from the Pentagon's Office of Analysis, taking him on a temporary secondment basis, like most of the Team's employees. Moreover, Anselm had many acquaintances at the Bridge, where he had worked even earlier. For

over twenty years, he had consulted and given opinions on numerous government projects, and although he had not achieved a high position, he knew almost everyone in this business and had often been very helpful to Hunt (they had known each other since the beginning of Nicholas's career).

Officially, however, Preslawny was still employed at the Pentagon, and the colonel undoubtedly had many good friends there. So it's not hard to guess how the whole thing went. Someone from the top of the EDC recognizes Hunt's hand in the counteroffensive against McManamara *et consortes* and showed dissatisfaction. Fortzhauser, still upset by the deaths of his men in Montana, knows perfectly well that it is Anselm who is Nicholas's greatest supporter here—so what does he do? He calls his old buddies and asks for a favor. That's how it works.

Why exactly did Hunt insist on further confirmation, what did he need all that Montana and Madame Florence for? Because—Nicholas nodded to himself—he still didn't really believe in Dr. Vassone's models, at least not completely.

"Who do you suggest to supervise Five?" he broke the prolonged silence with an effort. Preslawny looked up at Hunt. "Pawlucka. Maybe Wallberg."

"What's he doing there now?"

Anselm kicked a pedal, the window panes rolled in like night, from it emerged the interior of Lab 13 and Number Five staring at an invisible screen, from which the light of changing intensity and color fell on him.

"He's clearing the connections," Nicholas concluded.

"Aha."

"Listen, I'd organize some kind of farewell party, but..."

"Yeah?"

"Hmm, I have a close encounter of the third kind today."

"When's that?"

"Tonight. Damn, it's only six hours away."

"Good luck."

"Same to you."

SHE was wearing a blue dress with a deep neckline and invisible straps made of glass thread. Her short hair did not hide a pair of crystal earrings, one telephone, the other with the logo of her juridictor. On her shoulders a gray shawl like a frozen mist.

She offered Hunt her hand for a kiss. In NEti it was very dangerous, but with a gesture and face she made it clear to the restaurant's legal insurance cameras that she was the initiating party, and Hunt waited an appropriate two seconds and kissed her hand with a broad smile, so that they could see that he felt no offense. They sat down at a table in the mixed room. Waiters swarmed. Nicholas and Marina placed their orders separately. The waiter touched the backs of their right hands with the reader of the remote cash register operator.

"Ten minutes" he said.

The appetizers appeared. The older, unsculpted waiter showed off the art of lighting candles by hand with real matches.

"This is paraffin," Hunt indicated.

"'De Aunche.'"

"Yeah. You know, we actually have a working relationship..."

"I filed a sworn statement."

"Thank you," Nicholas nodded and relaxed, because every word they said was picked up by the insurance company's microphones and the mere statement about filing a statement was already a statement.

The string quartet from the other end of the room began a slightly livelier melody. Vassone smiled at her thoughts, massaged her left wrist, tilted her head to the side —it made her look twenty years younger.

When appearance, the physicality of the body, no longer determine a person's age precisely enough —or at all —secondary features gain importance: the way one moves, the liveliness of one's gestures, facial expressions, the style of speech.

"Would you believe that I sent my matchmaker to her almost at the same time? You beat me to it by a few hours. When did you place the order?"

"When I was still in the hospital in Boston."

"Oh?"

"Maybe it wasn't me," Marina smiled "maybe it was that girl from the Fourth's Monad."

"Or the Fourth himself" Hunt replied with a smile. They laughed politely.

"I see the artists did a good job."

"So far it's only symbiotic skin."

"I wouldn't know."

"Because it cost a lot."

"You're probably the only scientist I know who came from a rich family."

"Do you know so many of them?"

"I meet them. You know, I thought that it was the desire to stand out, to improve your status that gave you this drive to spend years poring over computers, stuffing your heads with poisonous words, digging into boring details..."

"You don't believe in so-called passion?"

"Is Krasnov supposed to be this example?"

They laughed again.

A waiter appeared on the horizon with a cart filled with their orders. Hunt pointed at her. Vassone glanced, raised her eyebrows, took a small sip of wine.

"Hunger," she murmured, "is one of the three great gods of humanity."

"HUNGER is one of the three great gods of humanity," she had told Hunt that day they first met, when Nicholas had offered her some krups.

“What are the other two?” he had asked.

“Envy and Laziness.”

He took the krups from his desk so that he could gather his thoughts. The hum of supercomputers coming from the adjacent rooms was an irritating background to all their words, spoken and unspoken. There, information about humanity was ground up; there, the mechanical cabalists of the genetic destiny of *Homo sapiens* meditated endlessly.

Vassone crossed her legs —the artificial silk flowed in wet waves of black, a tanned ankle and calf emerged from the slit —she rested the box of krups on her knee and began to pick them out with two fingers, with the steady movement of an entomologist fishing beetles and butterflies from a collection with long tweezers. Then she would crack the hedgehog nut with a quiet crunch and swallow it.

“So what’s the deal with these telepaths?”

“Ah, telepaths. Still pure fantasy when you say that word, isn’t it? I had to get used to it too, for a long time. But once you accept the idea, you’ll accept their existence as a fact...”

“So what then?”

“Then the gates to a new world open. I had to reject all the simplest associations, *a priori* assumptions put into my mind by the cultural sphere in which I was raised, and you’ll agree that telepaths have had their place in the bestiary of our age’s pop culture. You have to think independently. From the ground up. We start with one thing that we consider indisputably proven, the rest falls to pieces.”

“Something like Descartes. He sat down in an inn by the fireplace...”

“Well, no exaggeration. But the rigors are similar.”

“He had arrived at proof of God’s existence within the framework of his rigors,” Hunt smiled.

Vassone just crunched the krup for a moment.

“Maybe one at a time,” she said dryly. “Telepathy. How? There is undoub-

tedly a direct flow of information from mind to mind, bypassing all the usual senses. I have tried various filters. Nothing isolates. Therefore, some other, new medium must be involved here, hitherto unrecognized, not reacting with anything except the mind. For the time being, to simplify the model and to stimulate the imagination, I will call this ocean of psychomemes a mental one, referring with a brief analogy to ether.”

“Do you know how it ended up?”

“Ether? Yes. But I am talking about a model. I will not pull another quantum physics out of my hat right away. We have to proceed with successive approximations. So... mental disturbances, caused by the work of the brain, travel in waves with intensity decreasing with distance. I measured them through repeated tests with my patient as the ‘receiver’. I called the minimal portion of information carried by a thought wave a psychomeme. Every brain immersed in thought sows psychomemes around it, which telepaths, willingly or unwillingly, accept and incorporate into their own minds —and this is what we call telepathy. Here, as you have probably noticed, a very significant distinction appears between the brain and the mind. The brain creates the structure of the mind from complexes of neuronal discharges, and this —although please do not ask me how —is reflected in thought with psychomeme analogues. This process also occurs in the opposite direction, that is, thought —its disturbances: psychomemes —affects the brain as a physical object, causing reactions on the surface of its cortex that can be measured with appropriate equipment.”

“It seems to me a bit like multiplying entities beyond necessity. To make matters worse, a psychophysical problem... Maybe the pineal gland, eh?”

“Because you still do not believe in telepathy! Please accept this as fact. Then we have to look for explanations. Then none of the listed elements of the model are unnecessary.”

“Because I know... Oh well, please continue.”

“Do you know the theory describing the functioning of the brain in terms of Darwinian natural selection? Mini-complexes of neuronal impulses compete with each other in the fight for numerical superiority, multiplying and mutating for the best ”adaptability” to the situation, until one version overwhelms the others —and then a given thought wins in your head, you decide to do this and that, or you recognize an object you saw, a melody you heard. Because each

such self-organized set of impulses ‘represents’ some thought, memory, feeling, at least a fraction of them; and there are millions and millions of them. Do I really have to explain this to you? These are the basics of memetic engineering. I guess you’ve been to some courses?”

“Yes, I have.” Advertising agencies employ thousands of memetic manipulation specialists, all companies and institutions recruited them as public relations experts. Politicians and Kolobists surrounded themselves with them, the entertainment industry used them, and even religious leaders did not disregard their analyses. Few would still call memetics a more exact science than, for example, marketing theory—which, however, did not prevent decision-makers from relying on it and applying its recommendations. Apparently, in practice it proved effective, or at least it was considered so.“

In fact, Hunt had participated in several defensive memetics trainings in his Real Life, designed for high-level managers, where they were taught to spot trends induced by hostile memetic engineers and defend themselves against imposed associative structures. These were called Unconscious Assertiveness Courses (memetics was more Jungian than Freudian). It was by no means that simple. The only guarantee of independence of thought would be to completely cut a person off from the culture sphere, but such cerebrization would tragically handicap him, quickly making him a stranger in a strange land. On the other hand, however, free immersion in this ocean inevitably leads to a severe memetic infection. Unconscious Assertiveness Trainers taught how to construct and “install” a kind of filter on one’s mind, which would then recognize and reject aggressive memes without conscious awareness, preventing popular trends from taking root in memory and reflexes. Managers called these classes “snobbery exercises” among themselves. There were also advanced courses, where managers were trained in more complex mnemonics, refined ways of organizing and managing memory, in building Greek Mind Palaces, Shaker associative macro-definitions and similar things; Hunt, however, did not feel up to it.

Incidentally, it was during such a basic course that Nicholas heard the anecdote about memetics—that supposedly the only, yet self-referential proof of the truth of memetic theories is the induction by their propagators of a common belief that they are scientific theories.

“Yes, I was there, and you don’t have to explain it to me.”

“So please consider psychomemes as analogues of memetic viruses at the

level of thought.” She shook the box, looked in it: empty. She put it on the desk. “But this ‘simply’ is very misleading here. The difference is fundamental. Namely, that psychomemes also exist outside the brain, the mind, of a person. This results directly from the definition of telepathy. Therefore, there has been a violation of that formula of Descartes, which you have already cited here. Thought exists independently of the thinker. Thought can “think itself” even when there is no one to think it. ‘I think, even though I am not here.’”

“Yes, but consciousness...”

“Slowly, slowly. For now, we have in the model billions of psychomemes existing in the ocean of thought, separate from biological brains. If we treat psychomemes as a reflection of physical processes occurring in brains, we must apply the theory of natural selection to them as well. This is where the idea of parallel evolution emerges on the plane of thought, where psychomemes constitute the basis of a specific code of heredity. Evolution diametrically different from those intracultural and intramental conventional processes postulated by classical memetics and used in advertising campaigns by its engineers.”

To illustrate, she shook her right hand horizontally with the thumb bent: the latest popular Coca-Cola memogeist. Hunt found her performance indecent somehow, it was aimed mainly at unsculpted youth outside of NEti.

“Originally, we would have had a situation similar to the primordial ocean soup of inorganic compounds from Earth billions of years ago,” she continued. “Psychomemes do have a certain advantage over DNA. First, the rate of their mutations and generational changes is at least several orders of magnitude greater than biological DNA, which you can easily check yourself with a brief introspection. Second, psychomemes had a significant advantage in the self-organizing race from the start, because the brains immediately excreted them in the form of strongly connected, complex structures —after all, a telepath receives entire images, trains of thought, constructs of impressions and feelings, not a chaotic storm of small cortical impulses.”

“I think I see what you’re getting at...”

“You should.” She flashed a short, narrow smile, then immediately looked away. “There, in thought, there is life, there is consciousness. We must at least try to communicate.”

“...that the attempts so far have not yielded any results. Outer space seems ideal for this purpose due to the lack of any mental contamination. You will soon see how much the ‘sensitivity’ of your brain has increased in these conditions. It is the same as with vision when the air disappears, which disperses the emission and obscures the object with condensed suspensions. We are mainly interested in neuromonads. However, you will undoubtedly also have contact with animal monads, but please do not devote too much attention to them, we are working on their use on Earth with the help of people with lesser, not so rare abilities. Moreover, work is also underway on the strict, safe isolation of all the genes responsible for telepathy and the design of...”

At Hunt’s apartment. The lights were on. All the cameras and microphones of the insurance network were working. The pornography was at a viewing angle.

“Look me in the eye” he begged. “Look me in the eye.” No. Either her eyelids were squeezed shut or her gaze was averted, somewhere up, at the ceiling, at the wall. Even when they had previously uttered formulas of consent to NEti, she had looked to the side, focused not on the words and not on him, but on the earrings they were unfastening at the same time.

Both of them were sterile, of course; and so was their sex. Even if there was joy and pleasure —it was hidden, subdued, kept in check. Very few words. Sometimes monosyllabic urges or requests to slow down. When he sucked her breasts or bit her vulva, she purred low, without opening her mouth, from deep in her throat, in rhythm with her breathing. They were very careful in their kisses: the contact of tongues more intimate than a penis in a vagina. She couldn’t come for a long time, he held back, remembering that it was their first time, and when she finally discreetly honored him, he was too tired for anything more. He smiled at her to let her know that there was no harm. Although there was.

She stood up and, without looking back, went out onto the balcony. She walked slowly, uncertainly. Leaning her straightened arms against the balustrade, bent over, she breathed deeply, loudly swallowing gulps of night air. Sweat trickled down her back along her spine.

Hunt went to the table and lifted his earring to his ear to check if no one

had called; but no. He drank a glass of juice and also went out onto the balcony.

The airships, like pregnant sperm whales, shone above the city with their inner, cold light, filling the sky with burning runes of advertisements. After all, that was their original function, the residential sublevels and everything else were simply taking advantage of the situation, an additional opportunity to extract money. Economics outlines the vectors of development: first it was holographic sky paintings, but the wheelhouses with nano-canvas coatings turned out to be much cheaper in the long run for a certain type of advertising. Economics also determines the aesthetics of the landscape: modern advertisements were for the most part much less aggressive, more calm, more subdued than those of the last century, since they were aimed at older people, because here the bell of consumption had shifted.

Of course, the NEti network also reached the balcony. Consent, according to the current interpretation of the marital rape law, only extended to the time until the "first break in intercourse signaled by all parties involved" —so he stood a meter away from Marina and stopped his hand in mid-motion, which was already reaching for her cheek.

"Do you want juice?" he asked instead. Adding: "I have a pair of monokimonos."

"Yes."

So he brought both. The kimono, perfectly black, was made of single semi-fullerene threads. It was so light that Hunt could not feel it in his hand at all. Vassone put it on without tying it. The impacts of the photon streams and the movement of air constantly bent the monofabric on her body into soft sculptures of darkness.

There were three wicker armchairs on the balcony. Marina sat on the one in the corner. She instinctively crossed her legs, placing the not-fully-empty glass on her knee. Hunt was afraid that the glass would fall —one sudden muscle contraction of her thighs would be enough —but the juice did not ever stir until the very end.

A black spider was wandering along the side wall of the balcony.

"A spider seen at night," he hummed "means love."

"Love? Such small ugly things?" She smiled crookedly.

"You have very beautiful breasts."

"Thank you on behalf of my sculptors. Bad. Try again."

"Do you see the one with Pepsi-Cola?" he pointed upwards. "That's where my sister lives."

"Oh, right, the one with the senator."

"Exactly."

"Showing off with these skyhouses."

"Do you think?"

"You've read the reports on the terrorist threat. These are perfect targets for them."

"Well, there are various safeguards..."

"Exactly. A few powerful surface-to-air missiles warheads. Even N-technology can't handle that. Besides, the shockwaves will take them out."

"You know, a few powerful warheads will blow away every building in this city."

"That's also true."

"Do you know anything about this?"

"About what?"

"Airships. Nano. Explosives."

"Why would I? Not my field. Why are people with academic degrees expected to have the same amount of knowledge in every field? My son knows ten times more about economics than I do."

"What does he study?"

"He's not studying yet."

“Yeah, now everything is spread out over time, first schools, second schools, third schools, studies and postgraduate courses, you don’t enter adulthood until you’re thirty.”

“Civilization, my dear sir, civilization. We all specialize.”

“But it’s not about helplessness or immaturity. A hundred companies on New York’s stock exchange are controlled by teenage finance sharks. In some states, they sell incubi to fourteen-year-olds.”

“My son is seventeen.”

“Sorry. That’s not what I meant.”

“No offense taken. I know.”

“What were we talking about?”

“About people with academic degrees.”

“True. Krasnov... But no. I wanted to ask about you. You didn’t answer me in “De Aunche.” If this isn’t the wild determination to make a name for yourself that is characteristic of poor immigrants —then what is? Just don’t tell me I’m simplifying: eighty percent of doctoral students at our universities are first—or second-generation immigrants from the south. So what does real ‘passion’ actually look like? Hmmm?”

”Oh, if only I knew! It’s somehow... How many times do we make conscious, well-considered decisions about the shape of our future lives? You can count them on the fingers of one hand. Some don’t make them at all, it flows by itself, by force of inertia; in fact, most people do. I’m no different. Did I want to become a doctor of cognitive science? No way. It was all out of pride and megalomania. Even as a child, I wanted to impress everyone around me. I showed off at every opportunity. I told my peers incredible stories, weaving every foreign-sounding or exceptionally long word I heard or read somewhere into conversations, and when they didn’t know what I was talking about —because how else would they know? I would widen my eyes and tap my forehead. Over time, the satisfaction of these triumphs began to be outweighed by the fear of making a fool of myself. So I studied encyclopedias and dictionaries, spent hours at the computer, searching for new areas to drain of baroque terminology. So, somewhere around the age of twelve, it turned out that I was the class top student, and then it was pure

terror, because I couldn't afford to fail any of my subjects. I hated everyone, and those of my peers whom I impressed the most. The power of other people's imaginations is monstrous. I sentenced myself to a cage. But these were the antics of a small child —and a teenager was paying for them. There was no turning back from this path. Later, at the age of sixteen, seventeen, I realized that I really was interested in what I was reading, that I was looking for more information and browsing through catalogs only to satisfy my own curiosity, driven by fascination with the subject, because I had long since stopped showing off cheap tricks of erudition, now I was posing as more stupid than I actually was, I didn't even care about winning discussions... In this way I sculpted myself. Who? A child of some years. What does my whole 'career' stand on? On my flaws, on the dark side of my nature. Because pride, envy, in the long run, are the strongest, most reliable motivations."

Hunt was silent, deeply disgusted. He had not expected such self-vivisection in response to his question. He tactfully directed his gaze to the side and up, to the city of airships. It was indecent, such an act. She should know the limit. What am I supposed to say now? How should I behave? True, I wanted greater closeness, intimacy —but, damn it, don't exaggerate...!

Now a problem arose: how to solve the arrangement of non-parallel gazes. You shouldn't look somewhere into the distant space, it's too artificial. Similarly, looking at your own fingernails does not fulfill the role. Something in between: a wall, a railing, so that the gaze wanders in a seemingly natural way. Someone will eventually break first —look straight, get up, leave. But let it not be me.

"It's enough to believe in the mind" she muttered.

"What?"

"Moments like this."

"What?"

"Just like this."

Crap: he looked at her.

Head slightly lowered. She smiled. He shrugged, scratched his right eyebrow with his index finger.

“It doesn’t take much,” he admitted. “You enter the room, they don’t even look back, and already a change. Things like that. Who does it happen to? Telepaths? No way. How many times does something like that happen... A dog barks at you in the street, at some point you’ve had enough of it, maybe you’re in a bad mood, in any case, rage prevails, and in that one moment you’re ready to kick it to death, snap, a millisecond decision, you haven’t even made a move yet, you haven’t changed your facial expression, the aggression hormones haven’t started working —and the dog already knows and falls silent, tucks its tail between its legs, runs away. Things like that. The mind fits subconscious premonitions. Or if someone is looking at you, the famous ‘eyes staring into your soul.’ We should look among secret agents. Who can best sense stalkers and so on.”

“Yeah, I know something about that.” She looked into the glass (that’s also a way). “When exactly did Fortzhauser withdraw my protection?”

“Hmm? Right after you got back from Boston. Why do you ask?”

“She’s a bit paranoid and...”

“Who?”

“She. Me.”

“Ahh.” He stood up, leaned his forearms on the railing, looked into the luminous abysses. “If someone is stalking you, we have to report it, we have enough leaks as it is, half the world already knows. At least you’ll be covered later if anything happens.”

“Stalking? Why would they stalk me? That’s not how intelligence works these days. Or maybe I’m wrong? You were before —where? At the NSA?”

“Never mind.”

He turned around and his gaze landed on the spider, laboriously wandering along the wall. Before he could think, he reached out to take it off and throw it over the balcony. In the end, however, his body turned out to be slower than his mind and fortunately Nicholas realized what he was doing in time. Oh! A trap! He exchanged quick glances with Marina, a forced smile at odds with genuine confusion.

He got himself into this, he had to find a way out himself. He still didn't lower his hand. Lower it —bad. Throw the spider out —also bad. It was also impossible to drag the moment out any longer, it would slide into another symbol, even stronger.

What to do, what to do, my God, how did I get myself into such unequivocal declarations, she was watching, I can't throw it out, I can't not throw it out...

She moved her head, went back to contemplating the contents of the glass.

He lowered his arm.

"Let's go, I'm cold." He moved toward the door. "Call a taxi?"

"The juridictor guarantees it."

"Yes, of course."

She drank the juice. He took the glass. Her fingers were cold, He apologized for accidentally touching her.

Release

BLACK turned off the screen, interrupting the computer's lecture, although he was aware that he hadn't heard anything yet —but it was too much at once, better in portions, it was easier to accept miracles and all improbabilities that way.

He shouted at the light, and the habitat went dark.

He strapped himself to the bed. Yeah. Thoughts, psychomemes, monads... We'll see.

Is anyone there...?

... *shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*...

The problem was that it wasn't always possible to immediately pick up foreign thoughts —they didn't always "push themselves to the front." It often happened that Black found obvious "fakes" inside his memories, opened after years: lovebirds that he had kept as a child (he didn't); his sister's face (he didn't have a sister); images of places he had never been. This was an additional reason why he didn't trust his own memory —although a less important one, because it was easy enough to recognize those "cuckoo eggs." But now, when he tried to "hunt" the monad, the matter had grown into a problem: the monad could be right there, the monad could be touching him, but he couldn't sense it, because its psychomeme tentacles bypassed the surface stream of his thoughts.

What he could sense: the slowly disintegrating remnants of Number Four, the increasingly smaller complexes of his psychomemes, like the one with the

horses. His own, which always gathered in a place where he had been for a long time. The computer explained it to him as a general rule: these things affected all people, but only telepaths were aware of it. In the case of people with mediumistic abilities, or simply oversensitive people, sometimes there are still individual "returns" of psychomemes: after some time he found himself in the same place and the same thoughts came to his mind as during his first visit, or a kind of *deja vu*: he had never been here, but he knows the area? —thanks to assimilating psychomemes of other people's reminiscences. Besides, it depends on the density of psychomemes in the mind, at an exceptionally high level almost everyone is already susceptible. This explains the existence of places —streets, buildings, rooms —characterized by a specific atmosphere: depression, terror, sadness, joy. Prisons are so gloomy not only because of the color of their walls.

For each person there is a specific threshold of thought pressure, up to which the mind resists the pressure of free psychomemes, and then —the barrier falls. Just like with the immune system: there are people who get sick every spring, and there are those who are not afraid of any epidemic.

Suddenly —through a quick visual association —Black realized how his "hunt" would look in a computer simulation: a lonely sun luring with its rays the dense greenery all around. Who is hunting whom here? After all, he is acting as live bait! Those sensors, the electrodes that Number Four was wrapped in —that's why. What kind of contact is possible with neuromonads? They will come closer, touch me... What will be left of my mind?

He felt terrifyingly naked in that cold emptiness of space and thought, exposed to view, defenseless.

What are Hunt and the others really after?

"Bait? Of course you are bait, that's what this is all about, I explained to you. But if you are asking whether you are destined for loss —then the answer is definitely negative. Apart from everything else, believe in our pragmatism: we haven't found your successor yet. That is: we have, but we haven't managed to intercept them, others were faster. You are extremely valuable to us."

"Really? It doesn't look like it to me. Do you know what will happen if I manage to attract the attention of a neuromonad, and I am really affected by it? Can you imagine that? I'm not even trying."

"Listen to me carefully. You will learn the mantric meditation block, it will protect you, the monad will not have access to you when you stuff your mind with neutral psychomemes. You will connect to the equipment so that we can monitor all the activities of your organism, including your brain. We cannot chemically block your telepathy, because it is an inherent property of the mind—like proficiency in mathematics or spatial imagination—but we can administer supporting hormones and chemical stimulants to you. Besides—we don't want you to plunge your mind into the middle of a neuromonad right away. Slowly, slowly. You'll tear off some of its psychomemes, then again. You'll tell it what you remember, what you think, what you feel. Maybe it'll absorb your psychomemes too. You're supposed to be there like a lighthouse, transmitting Morse code through the mind. Neuromonads are intelligent, they'll figure it out sooner or later—and that's exactly what we're aiming for, contact, mutual contact."

"Your parents probably wanted you to be the perfect used-car salesman, Hunt."

"They wanted a politician, for politics. Remember: don't expose yourself. You don't have to take the monad by storm right away. We only want to come to an understanding."

"Liar, bloody liar, you open your mouth, and the price of silver drops. I don't believe a single word you say."

Cursed Mr. Hunt, the Black gnashed his teeth, I'll show you an "agreement" here! Total!

But what could he do here? This was blackmail *par excellence*, blackmail so perfect that it didn't even require the articulation of a threat. After all, Black will shine for the monads here in orbit like the sun, an exploding supernova—and in this situation, all of Hunt's recommendations were one hundred percent consistent with the suggestions of the Black's self-preservation instinct.

He learned to "chant" on meaningless words, fall into a meditative trance, open his mind, release psychomeme prominences into his mind. He connected himself to all the equipment installed here. In doing so, he came across several old mental clots with memory vibrations recorded in the form of psychomemes—how they glued sensors to themselves, attached injectors, stuck needles in: Number Four, Number Three, Number Two. He never came across the psy-

chomemes of Number One, they probably assigned to him by another lab. Or maybe they were simply wiped out and scattered by the later psychomemes.

Having connected himself, he trained in conjunction with a computer that plotted lines of pulse rate, blood pressure, brain waves on the screen above him. The officer on duty —someone new, Black did not know this voice —encouraged him to exercise or recommended a moment of rest. But in fact, no rest was possible here. Even unconscious, he would have stirred up mental waves for kilometers around. What else was this, if not a suspended sentence?

When he quieted down, opened up mentally —he could almost physically feel, almost see the green permeating osmotically into the photosphere of the star of his mind. The model won.

He was bombarded by the relic radiation of thought —old, individual, degenerate psychomemes: the twitch of the muscles of the neck of a tyrannosaurus, the blood of a victim in the mouth of a saber-toothed tiger, a bone raised for a blow in a hairy fist, the view of a landscape from before the era of man, the heavy thoughts of whales, analogues of the nervous impulses of primitive organisms that were almost incompatible with humans.

High waves of white noise washed over him, a chaotic flood of psychomemes from the geyser of the present biosphere of the Earth, with particular emphasis on humanity: he rots in shackles in a Chinese prison, the warmth of the sun on the sand of the beach of the French Riviera touches his skin, the cold relief of the sucking of the mechanical milking machine on his udders, the tenth pain in my back as I bend to push a rice seedling into the mud.

He also radiated himself in all directions, screaming, beckoning, burning. Supernova. Come, come, come. Don't come, don't come.

Were those things that reached him from time to time, those wild, absurd combinations of psychomemes —bite time, *anabullga troso*, the cap is too yellow, we jump into the abyss of burden, ice grazes my eyes, divide, divide into minus two —were those the first touches of the neuromonads' tentacles...?

IN New York, Hunt had already returned from lunch at Santuccio's. Even while eating, he was planning his next moves in the dialogue with Number Five.

The guy was a demanding player. But he was in a lost position from the start. He was right, absolutely right: he was live bait and was destined for loss. But Hunt was also telling the truth: they did not have another telepath and the Black was very valuable to them. But what was this value, since according to the doctrine of force in the Contact Program, we use them like disposable signal flares?

Nicholas did not confide in anyone (he confided in himself! He was not that stupid), but he did not have great hopes for the success of the project. Even the existence of those neuromonads —defined precisely as "intelligent" and "self-aware" monads —seemed extremely unlikely to him. Hunt did not have the ability, which Vassone had developed so well, of believing in abstract models and the ability to turn them at will in his head. For Hunt, the electron was a ping-pong ball spinning around the nucleus of the atom. With such an approach —with such a formed mind —he came across as someone terminally ill with an astigmatism of the imagination in conversations with scientists: he simply did not see certain things. However, he was aware of this deficiency and did not judge himself. Perhaps this was a mistake —because others could also know his limitations and use a blind man for their own purposes: no one lies better than those convinced of the truth in the lies they tell...

Without waiting, he entered Marina's office —the Central Office premises did not have the individual door locks required by the New Etiquette.

Vassone was painting her lips. He was surprised: she even came to "De Aunche" with almost no make-up, why is she putting make-up on now? What's more, she smiled at him from over the mirror in a completely different way —almost warmly.

"Did you listen to my last conversation with him?" he asked after sitting down.

"Uh-huh."

"What?"

"What do you mean: 'and what'?"

"It's true," he muttered "they are kamikazes."

Vassone put her cosmetic bag away.

"You don't believe in the success of the Program, Mr. Hunt" she stated.

Nicholas cursed himself inwardly. This is how it ends. Because what are psychoanalysts for? What are teleconfessions for? He blew it, there's no hiding it.

He looked her in the eye impudently.

"Plant and animal monads —okay, I have evidence, indirect, but I do. But —neuromonads? This is just an elegant extrapolation. Even if it were true —how can you tell the difference? After what?"

"After the organization of thought. Monads of the first and second categories do not think. Here we are subject to an illusion caused by the fact that their 'body' is made of psychomemes. Similarly —if I am not overloading your imagination apparatus with this comparison —beings 'thinking with proteins' could take the entire flora and fauna of the Earth, their biology, as a manifestation of advanced mental life. The same with monads. Intelligence and consciousness must be sought in them a level higher."

Hunt reflected and lowered his gaze from his face to Vassone's chest, hands, legs. Again, fleeting surprise: she was wearing a brown monosari and a woolen waistcoat —not her color, not her style, in these six months he had never once seen her dressed similarly.

"All right" he mumbled, searching his pockets for noniks "but what is this, this 'higher level'?"

Marina leaned back in her armchair, looked at the ceiling with narrowed eyes.

"These will also be mere approximations, models, extrapolations. At this stage I can't offer you anything more. A higher level... thoughts as a form of organization of psychomemes. Because psychomemes are not like that: you don't think with all the cells of your organism. In this sense, I don't suppose that neuromonads are at all aware of the content of psychomemes —for them it's dead matter."

"Wait a minute! So how can we attract their attention? What good will it do us if telepaths catch fragments of their thought clots, their bodies: psychomeme complexes —what? Nothing!"

"You know," Vassone said slowly with a peculiar smile "there are ways to do this. A blow with a sledgehammer and everyone will notice the volcano under their feet."

"In English, please," Hunt growled.

"Killing a large number of people or animals with well-developed nervous systems in an identical, very painful way..."

Nicholas looked into her eyes involuntarily.

"Are we talking about mass, ritual murders here?"

Vassone nodded.

"There are precedents in history. Where do you think the tradition of hecatombs to appease the gods came from?"

Gods? Gods? Aren't we going around in circles... Wait... The woman told me then: 'They'll find me God'. What's all this...

"Returning to the 'higher level'" Marina interrupted him "I can say the following: there are certain legitimate assumptions. Let's take the issue of intelligence itself. In standard IQ tests, analogy tests are used to determine the mental capabilities of the person examined, simultaneous n-element operations: A is to B as C is to D, E or F. The maximum for *Homo sapiens* as a species is considered to be about a dozen elements, due to deviations in the cases of the particularly eccentrically sculpted. This refers to the number of so-called 'portions of information' that you can simultaneously rotate. In the times of keypad telephones, various methods were used to divide long telephone numbers to enable them to be kept in the 'operational field' of the mind. It is easier to remember 'seventeen twelve three hundred two' than 'one seven one two three zero two'; I know, because I myself am still learning numbers by heart, it has already turned out to be very useful several times, I advise you to do the same. The ability to work on such multi-element sets is what we call intelligence. Neuromonads, on the other hand —I don't think there is any upper limit to the number of these elements. This is not intelligence at all that can be accommodated in our scales, you might as well weigh rocks with a chemist's scale. This aspect is also connected with the ability to think in "supermetaphors," that is, metaphors built from metaphors, because..."

"Silence!" Hunt barked, and Vassone fell silent. "That's not what I asked. I asked why the hell are we sending telepaths into orbit there, since you say that they are like cold hamburgers for neuromonads. Well? You misled us, doctor. You misled the government and swindled hundreds of millions! This is criminal."

"Oh, don't exaggerate. Nothing so dramatic. After all, you know yourself that communication is possible, well, maybe not communication —contact; and it is based on forced, repeated reactions. If you throw hamburgers to a dog, it will follow the thrower. How do you think the Fourth trained and sent the animalna to me? That where this Schatz's Monad Wars came from?"

"A dog. Animalna. But —neuromonads? You've just given them to understanding that we are like those dogs to them."

She shrugged, smiled, winked.

"Yes. But we are talking about contact here. Isn't that the name of this Program? Contact. What comes after —that's not my business, I'm not a politician. I guarantee that it will happen sooner or later. That's Five. Each of them feels, sees their 'body' and can directly influence it. Regularity will eventually draw the attention of every intelligence. It's actually quite surprising that we know about them, and they don't about us."

"Where does this certainty come from," Nicholas grimaced mockingly "that the neuromonads are unaware of our existence?"

FEAR. Fear that makes your breath hurt. Why? Is this fear of something specific? Of what? He was playing *go* on the computer, he wasn't even connected to the medical monitoring sensors. What was going on? He was only asking himself these questions, because he was a telepath and could recognize when his thoughts jumped to a different track for no reason at all. He immediately started chanting. But the fear was already too great, it made him shiver. This is not me! Not my memory! Not my will! Not my fear! "I'm drowning!" he screamed. He grabbed the sensory belts, the hood with electrodes... he didn't feel them, his hands informed him about something wet and hot with their sense of touch, rough, although he could see that it wasn't true. "I'm drowning," he repeated and felt that he was swallowing some hard, spiky object, although he wasn't swallowing anything of the sort. He choked. Without any points of sup-

port, he spun in a weightless pirouette. A view of green meadows opened before him, the blue of space above. The brightness of the summer sun on the hair and skin of naked girls who ran toward him. "Not my heaven," he said, falling to the ground, heavy again, so very heavy. "The seventh gate, the black-eyed houris, have I fallen in battle, their Lord will announce to them the glad tidings through His mercy and through His pleasure and through the Gardens, where they will have eternal happiness. They will dwell in them forever. Oh yes!" he cried in exultation in Arabic, his mouth full of warm soil, although he did not know Arabic. Those battles, when the infidels fell under the cuts of his damascene, those journeys under the empty Moon... *al-gajb* was revealed to me. I have reached... In the abyss! In the abyss. Under the cover of darkness. I am a snake that crawls straight into the open maw of an even bigger snake. The scents build around it intricate barbicans of promises of fulfillment. Mmmmmm. Experiences of the body. Until —until —until I touch the wall and the habitat turns under my feet. The labyrinth is going crazy. Where am I? Who am I? Space —station —hood with electrodes —me, me, me. —It's dissolving me! —I scream, trying to dodge the jellyfish that swims up and stings my naked fins. —It's digesting meeee... —What's in the boulder, what's in the log, what's in the inhinshton. Alnaburga fangaza and seven bars. I'll seize the shoot, it's on the sticks, drilling everything in the pines. Let the trunch steal. Alnaburga fangaza, Alnaburga fangaza. I pass through the closed gate, my shadow is left behind. I am surrounded by angels whose presence I experience with my ninth and eleventh senses —eye contact, the sound of weight; how they burn, how they burn! Closer and closer. Is this blackness? I already want it, I already want it, I want all this, such is my will, I desire unity, I remember a thousand-year life in the shadow of this desire. Embrace me! Swallow me! I embrace and swallow —for this is already me, me, me, me-me-me-memememe me me e mee e me meeme e e me e e e e

”PLAY it again,” Hunt told the computer.

”From when?” The dialoger asked.

”Since the first scream. Translation in window.”

On the darkened windows of Dr. Vassone's office, where their message had reached, the interior of Lab 13 appeared, and in it —Number Five on the bed, staring at the wallpaper screen above. He stopped his hand in mid-motion, his eyes widened. He screamed. I'M DROWNING, he announced to the computer

in English in the lower dialogue window. Number Five tried to strap himself in, put on the electrode cap —nothing came of it, objects slipped out of his shaking hands. I'M DROWNING, he repeated. He spun around, he started to hit the walls, he seemed to lose consciousness, he no longer had control over the movements of his limbs: a rag doll. Yet he mumbled: NOT MY HEAVEN. SEVENTH GATE, BLACK-EYED HOURIS, HAVE I FALLEN IN COMBAT, Their Lord gives them good news of His mercy, pleasure, and Gardens with everlasting bliss, THEIR LORD GIVES THEM GOOD NEWS OF HIS MERCY, PLEASURE, AND GARDENS WITH EVERLASTING BLISS, TO STAY THERE FOR EVER AND EVER. SURELY WITH ALLAH IS A GREAT REWARD. OH YES! The computer marked the part spoken in Farsi in a different color. It immediately added a note that it was a quote from the fourth surah of the Koran, *Repentance*, *At-tauba*, verses 21-22.

"He knew Farsi?" Hunt asked Marina.

"No, at least it's not very likely," she replied.

Number Five, meanwhile, seemed to have partially come to his senses: he caught the hood drifting toward him by reflex, looked at it with surprise, his pupils dilated. He screamed again. DISSOLVE ME! DIGITIZE ME! Then he began to babble. The computer announced its complete translational impotence with red stars. Within a few more seconds, Number Five stopped moving. Based on the rhythm of his chest rises and the measurement of the concentration of carbon dioxide in the habitat's atmosphere, the medi-analyzer diagnosed a sixty percent probability a coma analogous to the four previous cases.

"When can we raise the "JFK?" Hunt asked the signet ring. "Okay, let them get ready. If anything changes there, let me know."

He reached over Vassone's shoulder and turned off the screen, the windows returning to their Venetian transparency.

"Either it's just me," he said, "or there's some pattern to it: each successive telepath lasts less than the one before. The question is: why didn't this happen to anyone else in orbit?"

"You know why. The minds of these five were defenseless, open, exposed to the ebb and flow of thought: that's what telepathy is all about, that's why we found them and sent them up."

"Yes —but if it has such a profound effect on them, the non-telepaths should at least feel something."

"Mr. Hunt, you've fallen into misleading patterns again. We're not sending them into orbit because that's where the neuromonads 'live' —but because we need to eliminate the thought disturbances 'caused' by the Earth's biosphere and to 'expose their minds to view.'" She marked each quotation mark with a quick movement of her long, manicured fingers. "So that the neuromonads would be tempted. So that we could distinguish their influence from the influence of the environment: people, animals. On Earth, something like this" she pointed to the windows "could also happen to them, the telepaths. But it has not happened so far, they were hidden in the white noise, the neuromonads avoided them —Statistically: billions, and of them a few dozen, even fewer before the Gene Chaos. Although you know very well that shallow psychomeme osmosis happens all too often. In everyday life, to people not even particularly disabled. I have mentioned the crowd more than once, in a crowd everyone will feel it. But also, for example, during strong endorphin stimulation, also at the moment of orgasm, at the moment of cerebral hypoxia... There are methods, we have the right specialists —the Tibetan brothers have long practiced systematic fasting, mortification of the body, exhaustion of the body weakens the immunity of the mind. Read the orthodox definition of nirvana. Familiarize yourself with the idea of karmic molecules. The analogies are numerous and clearly visible. But all this is nothing more than shallow psychomeme osmosis. I will repeat: statistics. Telepaths were hidden in this dense magma and had a really slim chance of any meeting with monads."

"From this it follows that someone else, a non-telepath, did, hmm, meet."

"Yes, but they were non-telepaths, their minds were bricked up."

"Really? Do you remember those stories about cosmonauts having mystical experiences in orbit? Maybe they were walled in —but their minds burned just the same there in the void, tempting and attracting."

"So what kind of influence is this? These 'mystical experiences'!"

"Really?" Hunt repeated. He leaned over the desk, looked Vassone in the eye from a distance of a dozen or so centimeters —under the net such behavior would cost him at least a year's salary. "Those billions down there? Those whom this —because I still assume randomness and lack of awareness of the actions

of neuromonads even by the law of statistics —happened to? Because it did happen to them, you know that it did.”

”What of it? Vague dreams, sudden mood swings, momentary attacks.”

”I’m coming to the conclusion that this Schatz is right after all. The Monad Wars, Doctor. Think about it for a moment. Haunted houses, psychomeme accumulators, these plant monads —they can possess. Even animal monads. Please take a look at yourself. You’re not a telepath. You’re ‘walled up’, aren’t you? So what? You’d scratch your eyes out. Take a good look at yourself. Since when do you paint your lips? Since when do you wear dresses? Since when do you use that perfume?”

”Since when do I allow myself to flirt at work?”

”Exactly, since when?”

”Will you please stop invading my privacy?”

Hunt sat down in the armchair without a word. He lit a cigarette. Someone whispered a question into his earring, Nicholas mumbled something in return into his signet ring.

Vassone began to play with a 3D-move glove.

”Let’s get something straight. The Fourth sent that monad at me out of revenge. It was a deliberate action. Like letting a bull terrier trained for fighting off its leash. Neuromonads, on the other hand, don’t even notice us. After all, from the beginning, it was all about making them notice us. So please don’t compare the power of the conscious invasion of a monad on the mind, even the mind of a non-telepath, to being involuntarily touched by psychomeme tentacles.”

”Perhaps you are right. Perhaps. The thing is that specialized animalna training turned out to be fully possible, and contact with neuromonads has not yet occurred. I must finally talk to this Schatz.”

”A change of favorites?” she smiled with pursed lips.

Hunt was relieved inwardly, because this was the real, old Vassone; and immediately he was furious with himself for this feeling.

”A change of tactics,” he emphasized. ”Besides, it is not yet a foregone

conclusion.”

”I understand: you will throw me to the wolves to divert anger. It is natural, I know the rules.” Vassone lowered her gaze to her glove. ”But I warn you against betting on lower monads: plant and animal. We can use neuromonads, because they are guided by some logic, they think, plan... but —unconscious monads? What are they? More or less random clots of psychomemes. What does that mean? Remember the shadows on the walls of Plato’s cave? Isn’t that what we’re talking about here: collective secretions of the mind? A million people who strongly believe in the existence of the Devil... Do you understand?”

”In God, doctor, and in God. Don’t we know this from somewhere? The trademark on the heel of God: made by man.”

”Please don’t laugh. I’m serious. What monads grew, for example, in a place such as Auschwitz?”

”But these are psychomemes: the body of monads. Not their thoughts.”

”Exactly. That’s why I’m betting on neuromonads. Because lower monads, in their mass, considered statistically —what else are they if not the essences of the general mentality, permanent representations of sociological trends? They have no ‘higher mental functions,’ no self-reflection, only homeostatic instincts and the meat of our thoughts.”

”Perhaps they are, as you would have it, demons. At least we can be sure that they are effective. But if they are demons, what will you call neuromonads?”

”I see you have already decided.”

”Not neuromonads?”

”I see you have already decided.”

”No,” said Hunt, standing up. ”But I must do it soon. The program is in crisis. I must make a choice. You have watched too many horror movies, read too much of the Old Testament, please stick to your studies, you do better.”

”Oh, but it is not me, my dear sir, it’s that young Catholic in my head, with the memory of her sin, that child murderer from Nova Scotia with masochistic tendencies.” She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk. She smiled,

tilting her head girlishly, "Or am I possessed? Beware of demons, my dear."

AND yet Marina Vassone had a conscience, or at least some analogue of one —because it bothered her that she had deceived Hunt so much, that she had lied to his face. She had little choice —she felt bad about this memory despite this. Who, who —she laughed to herself —me or her? But even in this laughter there was something that disturbed her.

She left the Central Office, went down to the twentieth floor and went to the park. The wind stuck her monosari to her legs, she didn't even feel it. The warm, rough pavement massaged the soles of her feet. A guy in a T-shirt with the holo ALL ROADS LEAD TO HELL smiled at her and covered his juridictor's clip with his open hand. It was a gesture inviting her to temporarily give up NETi. Lately, night trips to the city without the visible logo of the insurance company had become popular even among members of very high society. Some streets were not covered by the audiovisual surveillance network, and neither were the interiors of most old venues in the city centre, especially on the lower floors. An infrastructure of urban entertainment was developing here, parallel to the "upper" one, covered by the network and subject to the New Etiquette: cafes, restaurants, clubs, cinemas, trans houses, promenades and concert halls —all outside the NETi.

She smiled back at the boy. After sitting down on a bench, she unfastened and hid her necklace with the juridictor's logo. She had never done this before, such trips to high-risk zones were somehow not in her nature —it neither interested her, nor excited her, nor was it necessary for emotional relief, as psychologists used to explain this fashion. Now she gave in to impulse: her hand was faster than her mind.

Accidental and deliberate lies kept coming back to her, first those against Hunt. They will find me God, I said, and Nicholas only raised his eyebrows. They will find me God —because it sounded nice, so showy, pompous, a challenge to science, a challenge to convention —he could not have reacted differently, without breaking NETi. But I did not mean God, he was never God, an icon of history, a religious stone not for me. When they began eschatological digressions, I would leave, bored: unfalsifiable nonsense, a question of choosing a fairy tale for adults, a psychological straitjacket. ("What about God? —God was incapacitated for insanity." "How can an omnipotent being be good at the same time in

the understanding of any kind of morality?”). All these reservations still hold, I will not overthrow my own logic—but now I also know the God of silence, that point of reference for the girl with red hair who watched the evening sea for hours, listened to the roar of the waves while her crazy grandmother screamed at her father from the upstairs window, and Uncle Sean, dead drunk, slid and crawled back onto the rusty porch swing, tirelessly, back and forth, as rhythmically as the sea beating on the sand; and that God of the ocean waves, the God of the dark sky, the cold wind, the solitude on the white dunes—imposed himself on her, the child of hopelessness, with such overwhelming force that she simply could not disbelieve in him, although she tried, tried incessantly. But he would not be displaced. Then and now—Anna Melton-Kinsler. I am a religious atheist. As a child murderer, I am wiser than the doctor: no one will ever find me God. Nearby, a pair of holographic elves were inviting passersby to the cinema. She glanced at the ad: *Twilight of the Gods* by Tsien Szu. She didn’t like Tsien, the wildness, the expressiveness of his vision—it put her off. At least that’s what she had thought until now. Now she felt the urge to immerse herself in his creation. She entered, paying with her personal cashchip: the mechanical ticket collector kissed the back of her hand, in a split second communicated with the miniprocessor implanted there just under the skin, confirmed her identity, made the transfer and sent a message to the client’s bank. She entered the dark hall. Six minutes until the start of the screening. She sat halfway down the middle row.

She didn’t really like going to the cinema at all. For as long as she could remember, people had been constantly predicting the imminent demise of this form of entertainment. But cinema was already an art, like painting or poetry: a coherent message from the author. Only where interactivity ends does the creator’s coherent vision begin.

Cinema therefore split in two directions—pure entertainment went in one direction, art in the other. The entertainment branch in turn divided into increasingly virtualized simulations and classic 2D and 3D films in which live actors appeared. Or rather stars—because they only played this function to focus public attention. A live star can get divorced and married for the twentieth time, be accused of murder, get caught with a prostitute, be photographed with a mafia boss—this path to fame is closed to computer simulation. Unless it is about necrovision, i.e. hanging onto the fame of dead stars—but then you have to pay a lot of money to the owners of the rights to their images.

The second path that cinema took, the path of pure art, led to works such as *Twilight of the Gods* —the so-called "multimedia haiku." The development of computer graphics made it possible to become an independent creator. The extreme of this trend were auteur films in the literal sense of the word, because every pixel of every frame was the result of the work of one person. Of course, working "by hand," Tsien Su would not have finished his *Twilight of the Gods* until the end of his life: he used graphics programs designed specifically for the needs of the film.

The film started and after a while Vassone realized with some surprise that she really liked it. Even Wagner was somehow bearable. The hall —out of NETi —was probably one tenth full. In the better districts' cinemas, which were under surveillance, attendance was higher, where going out "to see a film" — to see a director, an actor — was an element of social life, while here people were clearly satisfied with screen wallpapers. Cinema will never die, Vassone thought. It's the same reason you put on headphones to listen to your favorite album, even though the quadraphonic sound system provides you with sufficient comfort. Here, you need a certain devotion, a certain exclusiveness of perception. She felt that she liked cinema, that she liked Tsien Su's style, she remembered those thousands of hours of screenings spent in small off-net rooms in her town, in solitude, far from Ralf and the eternally screaming brats.

AN evening at "Santuccio." Through the open windows —the New York sky. To the left of Cygnus Tower —Little Italy, The Manhattan Bridge, finally Brooklyn Heights and Cadman Beach, the view is as far as you can see, the view is blocked by the Steel Quintuplets, a drug company's thousand-year-old buildings. To the right —Soho and Greenwich Village, the sky labyrinths of Gramero. Hunt sat down at a table on the terrace, under the transparent floor there were seventy floors of a street burning with multi-colored lights of advertisements and signs of shops, restaurants, cinemas, hotels. The popularization of remote work systems —Toffler's belated and weakened third wave —and the commercialization of discoveries of nuclear engineering allowing the creation of super-strong structures from ultra-light materials —led to a change in the character of the center of large cities. The "three-dimensionalization" of architecture was just one of the side effects, but it was probably the most striking to the visitor to the metropolis. The streets, which were more like canyons before, now finally lost their appearance of "flatness," "two-dimensionality" —the stre-

et was as much the surface of the ground below as the vertical surfaces of the side walls. This was where viaducts for cars, bicycles and pedestrians ran. The greenery of parks "suspended" on nanostrings and supported by glass pillars tens and hundreds of meters above the ground. Public, paid elevators, mounted on the outside of buildings, moved crowds from the "bottom" to the roofs in seconds. Deeper, on the lower floors, the lights burned around the clock, the time of day had no significance there, even rain rarely reached there. The method of addressing changed: in addition to the street and building number, the floor number was mandatory, because people entered the interior of a given floor directly from the outside, internal staircases lost their importance or, in newer buildings, they were completely missing. Neighborhood communities developed horizontally, not, as before, vertically.

So many things change, Hunt thought, choosing his order on the table's sensepad. So many things —constantly, ever faster and harder to understand, if it is possible at all, because some things are fundamentally incomprehensible. There is nothing to understand from the form of an ink stain spattered on canvas. Yet I remember that Manhattan: a random collection of menhirs of concrete and metal...

Where does this old melancholy come from? He looked across the canyon at the dark windows of Central. Was Number Five already resting in his sarcophagus, next to the other half-corpses? The words spoken in that conversation, conducted with a millisecond delay, came back to Hunt. How had he convinced Black... What exactly? After all, none of this made sense...

Have they brought him in yet...?

"Mr. Nicholas Hunt? I beg your pardon if I am invading your privacy..."

He glanced nervously around.

"Ronald Schatz, am I mistaken?"

"Indeed. Once again, I apologize..."

You're welcome, Nicholas thought. In the morning, he received a call from an old friend from the DARPA director's office, warning him that a certain Ronald Schatz was throwing Hunt under the bus by sending reports about the waste of human potential and Nicholas's use of the Team's personnel for private

assignments. Someone else in Nicholas's place would probably have reacted in panic, immediately countering. Nicholas, on the other hand, who had a lot of experience in this, did nothing: it would all blur, such things always blur, best ignored.

"But please, sit down and forget about the Etiquette," he said politely "I'm too tired today."

"Oh, yes," Schatz agreed, sitting down, "I heard about Five."

"Exactly," Hunt sighed. "I wonder if we didn't make a mistake at the very beginning."

Schatz quickly placed his order and turned off the counter.

"You won't hold it against me if I ask you what you thought about my *Monadic Wars*?"

"If it weren't for the Four and his vindictiveness, I wouldn't have the highest opinion."

"Did you doubt the usefulness of lower monads?"

Hunt grimaced.

"I don't know. Vassone suggested it to all of us. You know, they also caught telepaths, and we didn't have any information from the intelligence about leaks of similar experiments in their orbital facilities, and nothing of the sort results from the analysis of the onatmospheric movement. Maybe they kept them on Earth, maybe they were intended from the beginning to train animalna. The attack on Vassone was primitive, a brutal break-in. But Four also had little time and limited possibilities. Imagine several telepaths using their talents together to train a monad... It's been a few months already. Neuromonads would be an incomparably greater power, I don't deny it —but exactly... Oh, it's already here."

The waitress put down a tray and began to shuffle plates. Schatz and Hunt extended their right hands, and she brushed their backs with the soft, wide snout of the restaurant's remote cash register operator, which she wore in a holster on her hip —apparently all the waitresses at Santuccio's were on short-term contracts, none of them had an operator implant in the palm of their hands.

“You said that telepaths have a ‘talent,’” Schatz said after a moment, having drained a glass of arbon juice. “I see this in the Team’s documents and in the statements of its members. You are convinced that they, telepaths, are equipped with some additional sense, and that it is thanks to this... is that right?”

Hunt raised his eyebrows for Ronald to continue. Schatz entered the shallow half-blind V. Above Nicholas’ head, he opened a five-foot-long text window, on which he quickly called up the desired quote.

“When someone observes his own worry,” he begins to read, “with what senses does he observe it? Or with some separate sense? One that feels the worry? Does he feel it differently when observing the worry? So what kind of worry is he observing: the one that only occurs when it is observed?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“What I mean to say,” Schatz said, spearing a French fry on his fork, “is that a telepath differs from other people only in that his mind has never been isolated from his thoughts. A telepath does not have any additional sense. He does not ‘read’ anyone’s thoughts. He does not ‘dig’ into anyone’s head. He does not ‘spy’ on us. Simply put: nothing separates him from the surrounding mental disturbances. He is exposed to every wave, every slightest turbulence. Therefore, whatever happens to them there in orbit, happens to them because they have a much weaker mental immune system than ours. If, therefore, the pressure on the mind of those unknown external factors —which we all probably guess to be monads —were to be appropriately increased, they would influence us in the same way. The cases of ‘haunted’ places and Vassone’s case serve as proof that it is possible.”

“It’s amazing how you agree with Vassone. But where does this lead us? Could it be the Monad Wars? Huh?”

“Yes, among other things. But that would only be proving the proven, because isn’t that what this Program is all about —the idea of directly influencing the minds of ordinary people? But you probably didn’t believe in it yourselves, because why the surprise and confusion now?”

“Neuromonads...”

“Yes, I know: Contact. Vassone has a vision, you have to give her that.”

“Some irony?”

“No, honestly. But I can’t help but feel that somewhere along the way you’ve lost sight of the main goal: winning the IEW. I want to suggest an alternative way to win the Economic Wars.” He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, leaned back in his chair, looked at down, on the chaos of moving and still lights. “The shape of our minds is reflected in mice. In the phalanxes of psychomemes we record our feelings, beliefs, conscious and subconscious thoughts, imaginations, ideas, personal and impersonal archetypes...”

“I am talking about trends. As the resultant of a particularly large number of single-topic psychomemes. Do you know Kuhn’s theory of the paradigm of science?”

“Something from Wilson’s industry?”

“An old thing, from the last century. Every science develops exclusively within the framework of a prevailing paradigm, the totality of unexplained assumptions on which it is based and which indicate its goals: these are assumptions that scientists are not even aware of, accepted by them *a priori* somewhere during the process of acquiring basic knowledge, osmotically, without the participation of consciousness. It is very difficult to think against the paradigm later. Or at all —to become aware of its existence. Usually this is only possible during its breakdown, when there is a kind of phase transition to a paradigm more or less different from the previous one.”

“I am listening, I am listening.”

“Well, something similar also happens in the case of entire civilizations, cultures, nations. Except that the paradigm of civilization is rooted in the minds of each of its members, and I mean those people who were raised within it from childhood. One of the main assumptions of the post-Christian Western civilization, which today covers most of the world —is progress. Please tell me: are you able to imagine and believe in the further development of civilization without progress?”

“Hmm, don’t you get the impression that the term ‘development without progress’ contains an internal contradiction?”

“Exactly. This is how the semantic fields of these words have been shaped in

our heads. You've hit the wall of the paradigm. But these walls are already starting to crumble. Large memetic structures are being reconfigured. I'm leaving out religious sects here, because they have always existed—but currently we are observing a real explosion of cultural sects, whose members are trying in every possible way to separate themselves from civilization and liberate themselves from its paradigm. They do not accept progress—in any of its manifestations: technological, moral, legal, social. They consciously impose separate rules of life on themselves. Religion is important here to the extent that the attitude toward it constitutes one of the elements of culture as such. At first, these were minor additional rigors: marriage contracts that made it difficult or impossible to obtain a divorce, the creation of schools with a separate educational system from the official one, things of that type. But the trend is gaining momentum. The paradigm is crumbling. Civilization will soon have to redefine itself, re-specify itself. Civilization, not politicians, individual people, or even arbitrarily large groups of them.”

“I'm still waiting for some connection with the Wars.”

“Please. Remember what I said about trends reflected in thought. Something like the paradigm of civilization must be reflected there by a strong, developed psychomeme structure. Now let's reverse the vectors. After all, thought, as we agreed, influences people's minds. *Ergo*,” Schatz returned his gaze to Hunt and raised his index finger pointedly “using monads we should be able to change and strengthen these structures so that there is also a translation into minds that are not impaired, as the minds of telepaths are impaired. This is a fundamentally different concept from the one on which I based my analysis of the Monadic Wars—because here we are dealing with an unselective, statistical, slow and relatively shallow influence. But what prospects open up before us...! The dream of memetic engineers fulfilled! This is a continuous influence, an irremovable change, no mantras, no brothers will help here. Because it is not about decision-makers either. We could directly control the mentality of entire societies, nations, determine their way of thinking, electoral preferences, induce pacifist or aggressive moods as needed, model xenophobia...”

Schatz waved his hand, encompassing the entire evening New York with this gesture: a city bursting with laser lights and large moving holographs, covered in a glow of multi-colored shine and immersed in a fog of constant noise with several dozen million inhabitants.

“Imagine this, just imagine this...!”

Hunt looked at him and saw another self-proclaimed prophet of a hermetic religion, a preacher of a new ultra-virulent cult. Those blushes, that sincere smile, that pride lifting his chest, that fire of knowledge.

“Do you want me to send it up?” he asked. Schatz went down a few energy states, then winked at Nicholas.

“I sent it a long time ago,” he said. “Do you think I would have told you anything otherwise?”

Hunt looked away. So it went; it was a done deal. He himself wasn’t sure what he was afraid of.

THE dark windows were tempting, though. Like an intrusive fly, the memory of Number Five’s grim smile circled just above the surface of consciousness. By the way, what was his name? He knew, because he had read the other man’s *dossier* many times, but somehow he couldn’t remember.

Hunt returned to the Central Office. The officer on duty confirmed: the fifth sarcophagus was already full. Nicholas went downstairs. He couldn’t help it: his hand reached out of its own accord to scratch off fresh scabs. With masochistic determination, he marched through the empty corridors. He didn’t even realize how hard he was clenching his jaw. Once he caught sight of his reflection in the wall mirror and stopped. Something’s wrong with you, Nicholas, your step has stiffened. Pull your shoulders back, raise your head a little. No. Better.

The Central Office corridors were empty not only because of the hour: in fact, they were never crowded. Security considerations prevented the Program from employing people who worked exclusively online, but most of the Team’s assignments were still carried out outside of HQ. The team itself wasn’t all that large, after all —the staff was mostly bloated by the Fortzhauser section and the Moore section (responsible for coordinating the search for new telepaths, monitoring the rental sneakers, and analyzing reports of the competition’s actions in the future Monadic Wars). The corridors —lined with dark green carpet, with tasteful wainscoting —made HQ resemble the offices of old, conservative law firms. Nicholas walked in silence.

On the inner door of the sarcophagus room, someone had scribbled in green marker: LIFE AFTER CONTACT. Hunt instinctively raised his hand to erase it, but was suddenly struck by the genuine humor of the graffiti and stopped himself. Have I fallen so low? He thought as he entered. Am I some kind of caricature of a boss, who tracks down and squashes the jokes of his subordinates?

Number Five lay in the sarcophagus nearest the door. Like the others in a coma, only his face, devoid of all tension and expression, was clearly visible from under the semi-transparent layers of overprotective machinery. Hunt saw Black for the first time (or rather, now only his empty body) directly, without the falsifications of electronic transmission; live. In truth —Nicholas let out an uncertain chuckle —dead.

He touched the unconscious man's cheek. Warm. It seemed strangely unnatural to him. He should have been cold. He could hardly suppress the chuckle that rose to his throat again. He knew that the doctor on duty could see him on his LEDscreens, and yet he couldn't control his hand. It reached Number Five's eyes, covered his eyelids, fingers pressed against his eyeballs.

A phone signal squealed in Nicholas's ear —he jerked his hand up as if burned, jumped away from the sarcophagus.

"Yes?"

"It's Oirol. No crypto, watch out. We've heard about the recent, um, accident of your, um, envoy. In the context of the lack of a successor... It's hard for it to look anything other than a failure of the Program. Expect us tomorrow."

"Who do you mean?"

"Me and Bronstein."

"Jesus."

"Something's stirring in the markets" Oirol added in an apologetic tone. "The wars have suddenly become dangerous. Corps... But this is open. Hang in there."

"Thanks."

A call from an old acquaintance in the capital broke the spell binding Hunt. Nicholas cursed, cast an evil look at the default camera sockets, and left the

room. On his way out, he wiped off the inscription on the door.

During the ride home, a cold depression fell upon him. He unglazed the car windows and looked at the city full of lights and people, he looked but didn't even focus his gaze; he saw a colorful fog. Absolute mindlessness now stared out of his eyes. Whatever question they asked him —he wouldn't be able to answer.

Having arrived, he sat in the BMW in the garage of a former office building for half an hour before he finally got out. He didn't know why he had to get out. Why drag himself to the elevator, to the apartment. The slightest movement of his hand wasn't necessary and even when it went numb all the way from the elbow —he didn't move it to restore circulation. Movement, change —he couldn't stand it. Only absolute static saved him. He sat in darkness and silence. He couldn't feel his right hand at all anymore —he didn't have it, it had been amputated, the sensorium had been removed; he almost believed it.

Half an hour passed —he got out, went to the elevator, went to his place. He turned on all the lights, turned on the legal insurance network. He undressed —but didn't reach the bathroom. He turned to the kitchen —but didn't reach for food. (Was he hungry? He wasn't sure.) He went back to the living room, went out onto the balcony. The city jumped at him with its claws. He backed away. He went to the bar, stroked a glass, turned around, bumped into an abstract sculpture, sat down on the carpet, stood up, sat down again, stood up again, opened the safe, leafed through Lewis, closed the safe, turned on the music, turned off the music, turned on the LEDwall, turned off the LEDwall, kicked the table, bit his forearm, unfastened his telephone earring, fastened it again, called Anselm.

“Anselm? It's Hunt.”

“Ah. Did you get that report?”

“What report?”

“Krasnov mentioned that he might send something ...”

“What report?”

“There's progress with the Estep. They've finally selected a full, closed, safe sequence. It even looks good on the mice. He said he'd write it and send it. He's still perfecting this Estep. I pressed it a little and finally put Efes away. Here,

in general... Wait.“

Preslawny stopped and Hayden's silence rumbled in Nicholas's ear. He stood motionless in the wide passage between the living room and the bedroom, one hand raised to his mouth, the other clenched into a fist.

“So,” Preslawny continued “this is Krasnov's private farm. Actually, no one really knows what he's doing here. The sly guy knows all the tricks. Do you know that he even carries out NASA orders? He has a contract with MIT for... (Hey, leave it!) He brought people here from Bridge and from Grimmel. You should probably set the Washington dogs on him, he's clearly given up on Support, this place is growing into some fucking empire, sucking up funds like a black hole, they're digging twenty floors underground, he's ordered a reactor. We need to slow it down a bit before we grow the J. Edgar Hoover of science here. Are you still there, Hunt?”

“No, a hippopotamus bit my ear off. What do you think? That I'm God Almighty? He's been building that nest there for years, I'm not going to go after the Maginot Line with a hoe now, I'm up to my ears in shit myself. The fifth flattened out, in case you didn't know. Heads could roll. Guess who's first.”

“Eh, it can't be that bad, they've put too much into it.”

“If they start cutting high enough, the new mandarin might feel obliged to fix his predecessor's mistakes. It doesn't matter how much. It matters who put in.”

“They won't question the usefulness of the Program!”

“I teach you and teach you, you're still equally dull. Usefulness has nothing to do with it. What's important is what's left in the papers. Can you name me one of our financially or politically verifiable successes?”

“But if they had reasoned this way during World War II, the Manhattan Project would have collapsed after six months!”

“It's nice that you've finally started to notice the changes that have occurred over the last hundred or so years. We're in a great mood.”

“Put a stick in your eye.”

“Peace to you and your hippo.”

When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of atomic mushroom clouds growing in the sky over New York, real or advertisements.

Warfare

THE sun was at its zenith over the megapolis. But a storm was brewing, and the multi-level streets were drowned in shadows—from clouds, from dirigibles, from the upper streets.

A meeting was in progress in the conference room on the upper floor of Headquarters. It was attended by Nicholas Hunt, Joseph Moore, Dr. Marina Vassone, Colonel Fortzhauser, and Ronald Schatz, the latter at the express request of the two Washington visitors who had convened the meeting in the first place. The first was Jack Oiol, a doctor of economics and personal secretary to the Secretary of Defense, whom Hunt knew well; the second was a lean, unsculpted, red-haired man named Bronstein, whom Oiol had once told Hunt was the White House's angel of execution.

All seven in their most formal suits: stiff neckties, white cuffs, high-necked, thick, rubber-soled dress tabis, juridictor's stilettos under their chins, even Vassone in her black polysilk, silver rings on her fingers and toes, with a pendant between her breasts. Wrists on the edge of the tabletop.

Rituals of power, rituals of dignity, rituals of dominance, Form defines permissible feelings, this safeguard against our desires, otherwise the corporate bosses would be jumping at each other's throats with wild screams during negotiations; thank God for NEti. Hunt smiled crookedly behind the cover of his cigarette-perched hand.

"Okay, I understand everything," sighed Oiol, who had to play his part like everyone else, "but wasn't that just a waste of telepaths? You had five, all

gone to hell. The neuromonads were dead. Isn't that the current state of the Program?"

"Hmm..."

"So what is this? Because for me it's a defeat."

"Let me remind you," Vassone said, with surprising carelessness showing absentmindedness in her voice and uncertain gaze, "that the assumptions and chances of success of the Program were known to everyone from the beginning and at that time I heard no objections. Everyone is wise after the fact," she added, her gaze sliding over the heads of Oiol and Bronstein.

"It was a plan for total victory," said Hunt. Inspired by Marina's demonstration, he now looked melancholily at the city under the great airships, under the storm clouds. "Gaining the cooperation of the neuromonads guaranteed absolute triumph, because there is no higher card in this poker game. On the other hand, by following the line of least resistance and being satisfied with the animal ones, we would at most achieve a new equilibrium, because they would also have their animal ones, and the sword of the unaligned neuromonads would still hang over us."

"So we had to work on two tracks," said Oiol. "Because now we are at least half a year behind, and we are starting from the weakest position."

"Two tracks, hmm?" smiled Hunt. "Who was it that said 'the curse of half-baked solutions?'"

"Half a year?" Vassone wondered at the same time. "According to Moore, the rest started catching telepaths only a few weeks after us."

"That's true," Fortzhauser agreed. "The leak came from us. We started first. After us, the Chinese, then the Hong Kongers, then the French."

Bronstein sat, not saying a word, not looking at any of the debaters. His half-dropped eyelids suggested that the man was bored with the conversation that was teetering on the edge of an argument. Either he really wasn't sculpted, Hunt thought, or his sculpting had a truly extraordinary character.

"Let's stop dwelling on the mistakes we've already made," Oiol waved his hand. "Now we have to answer the question: what next? These five flatliners,"

he pointed to the floor with his thumb “are no longer of any use. The sneakers haven’t detected anyone new. We face the prospect of the Monadic Wars without even one trained monad on our side.”

“Perhaps Mr. Schatz will enlighten us on the situation” Bronstein muttered.

Silence fell. Everyone stared at Ronald. He cleared his throat, ran his fingers through his short hair.

“So, yes. The Monadic Wars. I will summarize the basic assumptions.”

Then he began to enumerate:

“In the first phase of the Wars, we should expect direct attacks on the minds of decision-makers. In the second —struggles conducted exclusively on the plane of thought, between offensive and defensive monads. In the third —attacks on intermediate links, i.e. telepathic trainers and professional mantric blockers; attacks both psychic and physical. The fourth phase, which is characterized by dynamic homeostasis, is the last and potentially infinite stage of the struggle, which no longer consists in attempts to gain direct influence on the decisions of the enemy leaders by sending monads with appropriate psychomeme ‘bombs’ —but in distorting the surrounding thoughts and seeping psychomeme ‘viruses’ from the monads. At that stage it will no longer be possible to distinguish the attacked, ‘infected’ mind from the ‘clean.’”

Then he began a new enumeration: “There are three possible variants of defensive reactions, First; transferring the entire burden of decision-making to computer programs. Second: harnessing the largest possible number of people to the decision-making process, i.e. de-intermediating democracy, and in the case of quick, tactical, secret or not subject to the authority of the public —randomization of the choice of the decision-making unit from the largest possible set of candidates, with each such choice concerning the necessity of solving only one problem at a time. Third variant: hiding the actual decision-makers and surrounding their identity with the most advanced secrecy —in a democracy this is very unlikely. Of course, unequally proportional combinations of the above solutions are possible. After the Monadic Wars are unleashed, already in their first phase, there will be complete subordination of countries and companies not participating in them to forces with monadic armies. This will happen either by influencing the minds of their managers so that they will start making only bad decisions, which will quickly lead to their economic collapse and sell-out; or —in

the case of dictatorial or highly hierarchical systems —by 'inducing' these administrators to conclude appropriate vassal agreements. Only those few entities that count in the Wars, because they rule the monads, will remain. This is how we will recognize the beginning of the first phase: rapid capital consolidation will occur. The reversals of the capital flow vectors will indicate the monadic powers."

"Tomorrow at 4:15 in the afternoon, Hanoi time," said Bronstein "The Hong Kong Company will sign an agreement with the United Economic Zones of Asia, under which the Zones will sell the owners of the Company a controlling interest in the Twelve Companies for a symbolic yen. Ladies and gentlemen, the Monadic Wars have already begun."

Hunt lit another tobacco-free cigarette. The storm over New York was gaining strength, lightning was splitting on the shells of the airships, flowing down the grounding cables. Advertisements burned amidst this dark hell of elements like runic spells of clashing in a sky of sorcerers.

His thoughts were churning in his head worse than those storm clouds. After all, no one would care; whose *de facto* fault it was —the seal of defeat and Hunt's name underneath would remain. It's not even about the actual state of the Program, but about the label that will be attached to it, about the noise with which it will fall. Bronstein —yes, he has this power: he can cause the Team to be disbanded based on an analysis of its results to date, which are in fact far from satisfactory.

"Question: why this meeting at all?" Hunt snapped. "What can we do without telepaths in action?"

"To at least provide protection," Fortzhauser snapped. "Our mantricians are at your disposal. They will certainly be more useful in Washington."

Oiol nodded.

"The Chief of Staff has already made arrangements with the Dalai Lama, we have always had good relations with the Tibetan diaspora."

"Give this protection too," Hunt recommended.

"Is it just me, or would this be phase three," Vassone asked, smiling ironically. "It's going like a bolt."

“Without our own monads on leashes, we can only defend ourselves” Oiol shook his head. “In the meantime, they will be carving up the rest of the world between them, and we —we will chant ourselves to death.”

Bronstein tapped his fingernails on the tabletop, zero interest in his eyes.

“There’s also the Support Program.” Hunt flicked the ash from his cigarette and looked at Bronstein. “Did you read the reports?”

Bronstein nodded.

“So you know that Krasnov succeeded in selecting the complete telepathy gene” Hunt continued. “Everything is still ahead of us, only with Estep will it start on a really large scale. This opens a completely new stage. It seems to me that it would be wise to gather all these experts and draw up a more rigid plan of action, to establish priorities... You will agree that there has been no clarity on this point so far.”

“There is only one priority,” Bronstein announced. “The Economic Wars. That is the only goal of your Program: to win them.”

“We’ll hold a conference,” Hunt said, trying to sound as if he were agreeing with Bronstein. He remembered well the golden rule of bureaucracy: if you don’t know what to do, call a conference.

“We’ll hold a conference, we’ll draw up a schedule.” He cast more spells. “Now that the Monadic Wars have begun, we have to change tactics. There is no question about continuing the search for the Holy Grail, Dr. Vassone will forgive me.”

Dr. Vassone watched the shadows on the ceiling.

“Great,” Bronstein muttered, standing up. “You’ve earned a reprieve.”

THEY went straight from that meeting to Santuccio’s for an early lunch: Hunt, Vassone, Schatz, Oiol.

“Jesus, did that Bronstein really come here for your heads?” Ronald asked, after placing his order.

Oiol laughed.

“Get used to it. You always look for those responsible for a failure first, only later for its causes, if at all.”

“It’s not so bad” Hunt shrugged. He was clearly relaxed, smiling beyond the limits of politeness. “We are the only experts on all this monadic crap, and with the Monadic Wars on their backs, they can’t afford to put us on the sidelines. I prophesy a golden age, a flood of free funds.”

“What is ‘we’?” Vassone muttered.

“You, oh wisest one,” he bowed to her without rising from his chair, “Nicholas —you.”

“Him.” Oiol pointed to Schatz with his spoon.

“An expert, of sorts,” she snorted. “He sat, thought, wrote. What do you know about monads anyway?”

“Oh, certainly not as much as you do,” replied Ronald, who had clearly already caught the tone that was in force at the table. “In case of any doubts, I will not fail to address a humble question to the oracle. For example, I am tormented by this question.” He took a sip of his drink and looked through his glass at the sun shining through the clouds. “Do the laws of physics apply to me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm, would a monad released on the Moon reach its victim on Earth in less than a second?”

“Are you asking about the speed of light limitation?”

“Aha.”

“To tell you the truth, we did not conduct any research,” admitted Vassone. “First, you’d have to train a monad, and we haven’t trained a single one.”

“Well, don’t be so modest,” Oiol gasped. “You trained the Fourth, who trained that animal.”

“What’s the point of that to you, Schatz?” Hunt asked. “Are you going to try to explain the paradox of simultaneous observations with the help of thought?”

“Oh, no, just maybe. I was curious.”

“I have a question for you, Doctor,” Oiol volunteered. “How exactly did you imagine this agreement with the neuromonads? What could we give them in exchange for the favors they render us that our enemies couldn’t give them? Huh?”

“Sacrifices, heaps of sacrifices” Hunt intoned. “Algedonic manipulations. What is pleasure for them? One thing is certain: food. Every organism hungers. What is their protein, the building block of their bodies? Psychomemes. So? Look at us, cruel Athena.”

“Are you drunk?”

Hunt made a strange face, winked at Schatz.

“For don’t our minds, treated according to the doctor’s theory of psychome reflections as processes occurring in the cerebral cortex, organized disturbances of thought —don’t they also constitute a monadic form of existence? True: they are attached to the body. But what does that mean? From the perspective of thought it means nothing. The body dies. Then what about the mind? The brain goes out; but after all, you have just proven, using the example of telepaths, that psychomemes do not need any physical support for survival. Therefore, the mind continues to exist. It is already a classical monad, plant or animal. Before death it had intelligence, self-awareness. The question is: does it have them afterwards as well?”

Oiol stared at Hunt during his speech with a persistence that was downright insulting in the New Etiquette.

“Does this mean,” he snorted, “that you are trying to contact the spirits of the dead? Are these neuromonads, alien intelligences of thought...?”

“You should have hired some necromancer,” Schatz snorted.

“Very funny,” Vassone snapped. “You are just confusing them, Hunt. These are two different levels of organization, and you know that very well. It is one thing —a human mind conscious of psychomemes, which are its memory, per-

sonality, structure; and what is different —neuromonad, conscious organization of psychomemes, aware of their meaning, ‘content’ in much the same way as we are aware of the internal structure of our muscle tissues, i.e. not at all.”

“I know how my muscles are built,” said Schatz.

“Really? Your muscles? Can you look into your own biceps, get down to the cellular level, read it in layers? Do you have some sense of physical introspection designed for this purpose?”

“I have microscopes.”

Hunt rapped his knuckles on the table top.

“Wait, slow down. We’ve gone too far with these analogies, soon we’ll have psychomeme electron microscopes. I accept your distinction. But that doesn’t close the issue, because one doesn’t exclude the other. What exactly happens to a person’s mind after death?”

Oiol sighed heavily, raised his eyes to the sky.

“It’s like I’m back in college. How on earth did we get into this eschatological channel?”

“Shut up, infidel” Hunt waved him off. “We’re talking about lofty things here.”

“I know, I know” Marina wagged her finger. “It’s Black, Number Five. ‘Not my heaven, the seventh gate, black-eyed houris’. Right?”

“He saw something there,” Nicholas pressed.

“He saw a monad.”

“So you deny it?”

“Why would I deny it?”

“The continuity of mental consciousness.”

“Yes. It is a different form of organization. When the brain goes out, the structure dies: a pile of psychomemes remains. They can survive, and in fact they often do, sometimes they even self-organize or are one of the elements of

the organization to the level of the homeostat of thought, *for example* haunted houses, ghosts of places of execution —but all this does not mean some kind of afterlife. The same is true of the body: it also does not disappear at the moment of death, it persists, its building blocks in the process of biological recycling even enter the composition of subsequent homeostatic machines of the physical world —but what of it? That is not the point here.”

The ordered dishes arrived, mostly rare steaks. Memetic engineers have for years been so fond of combining trends and, have induced the memotrends of vegetarianism and healthy eating that they have completely blurred them for Hunt and Vassone’s generations. Tartars, stroganoffs, animal fats —they were in fashion again.

The confusion over the distribution of sets and payment lasted for a moment, the waiter grabbed them by the wrists one by one and pressed the operator’s dry lips to the cashchip, which could be felt under the skin with a slight hardening.

“Mmmm,” he shook Schatz’s fork “but maybe someone will finally explain this passage about ‘victims, piles of victims’? What?”

“This is tasty” Hunt emphasized.

Oiol looked at his plate.

“Really?”

Hunt waved, irritated by the misunderstanding. “Victims, piles of victims” he repeated. “The question is: how to bribe the neuromonads. With tasty food, that’s what. The doctor will explain in detail,” he nodded to Vassone.

“Exactly.”

“In any case, I am basing this on her words,” Hunt emphasized. “Some small hecatomb... Preferably from people, not from oxen, because people have a more developed nervous system and they excrete more psychomemes, of higher quality. Of course, in pain, in agony, it must be a long, uniform suffering, in order to achieve the uniformity and coherence of emission —then only one experience, a cumulative charge. Of course, in the case of each victim it should be the same —hence the required ritual murders. They will like it.”

Schatz, smiling crookedly, looked at Oiol, Oiol with a face devoid of all

expression, as if made of cast plastic.

“Doesn’t the US Department of Defense finance research into black magic?”

IN the days that followed Bronstein’s visit and the announcement of the outbreak of the Monadic Wars, Hunt finally had his hands full.

First of all, he had to organize this publicly announced conference. Custom dictated that in such cases, one proceed with true Byzantine panache, that is, to maximally stretch the budget, and above all, try to ensure the participation of every specialist whose absence might later be pointed out to the organizer as the cause of the failure of the undertaking.

Because that was exactly what Hunt had expected: failure. He had never heard of such a conference, a conference, a brainstorming session or whatever he called it —that could be said to have ended in success. What form would that success take? One more gigabyte of post-conference trash? Nicholas’s future career would be decided by the course of events in the Economic Wars and the future balance of power in the capital. The conference was just a standard smokescreen – no one would be able to deny that Hunt wasn’t sitting here with his hands folded and was actually doing something! So the bigger the scale, the better.

However, this time Hunt was in a more difficult situation, because the list of participants was significantly limited by the security criteria imposed by Fortzhauser. Significantly, that is, the list included only those who were either already partially familiar with the Contact project or had access to secrets of an analogous or higher level of confidentiality. In addition, all those who were not US citizens or who were also citizens of other countries or signatories to exclusive cultural agreements, as well as people who derived most of their income from non-budgetary sources, were crossed out. This last condition was particularly painful for Hunt: it disqualified almost two thirds of the candidates. From the point of view of a counterintelligence officer, it made perfect sense – what defines loyalty more strongly than money? Nevertheless, for Nicholas, who himself would not despise a high position in the management of some mega-corporation, it sounded completely idiotic. After all, who can predict which of the experts, now working exclusively for the government, will not move to the competition in the future, with a dowry in the form of these secrets as well?

Everyone moves. Gone are the days when the state budget was the main source of financing for scientific work. Currently, it could be compared at most to the budget of a single, medium-sized company in this field. The strategy of financing research in key areas, dating back to the Cold War (when secret military technologies were always a few years ahead of solutions implemented for civilian use) was completely compromised in the sixties, when DARPA decided to focus on antigravity technologies in a great financial outburst. The beginnings were promising, but after a decade, the project fell through when it turned out that the curve of energy necessary to provoke the phenomenon increases exponentially in relation to mass. Then the government left the research to the private sector, which could afford to amortize costs over long periods of time and have a high percentage of failed projects, and which did not have to explain every cent denied to social programs.

Even the famous bionanotechnology, removed by international conventions to the sphere of secret applications—even that was only a few percent the result of the work of people from Bridge. The only advantage of government projects here came from the fact that—as “officially secret”—they were exempt from legal persecution, so scientists could go the furthest in their research there. But this limitation was not absolute either, because private companies had the possibility of moving their laboratories to more “legally friendly” places on Earth: there will always be some entity of international law desperate enough economically to be ready to change its domestic legislation to save the budget. More and more did so, especially in the field of bionanotechnology, which was currently at the peak of the scientific boom; not the abstract bionanotechnology of a century ago, but real, practical bionano engineering. Because when nano reaches such a scale and precision that it can independently recombine DNA, biological structures and nano-derivatives are reduced to a common denominator, a single code, with the help of which it is possible to change/build both living and inanimate matter. As far as Hunt was aware, this was what the work at the Bridge was currently focused on: creating a nanotechnological analogue of deoxyribonucleotides—such three to six basic nanoelements, whose mutual spatial orientation and the way they are connected would encrypt in a simple, self-executing language, all of the properties of the creation created from them (whether it was another nanobot, only an order of magnitude larger, or a pseudo-organism the size of an animal).

Ultimately, the list was limited to fifty-two names. For Hunt, this meant a very intimate conference. For Fortzhauser, it meant an almost one hundred

percent certainty that the secret would leak out.

In the end, Nicholas had to compromise, and to avoid further objections from Fortzhauser, he chose the EDC base as the venue for the meeting—not a well-known building on Wall Street, but a massive, concrete “bunker” built on the site of a twentieth-century factory in the Bronx, right on the East River. This was a doubly clever move, because it also shifted all responsibility for any later leaks to the Corps—Hunt washed his hands of it. Apparently; however, the EDC chief of staff, General Kleist, had seen through Nicholas, because she refused to provide the premises for the conference. The official trip would take weeks, so Hunt went to the Bunker himself, taking Anselm with him to keep in shape, who had just returned to New York for two days to wind up the rest of his affairs and discuss the situation with Nicholas in peace. They went straight from Cygnus Tower.

The Corpsmen called it the Bunker: it rose six stories above the ground, but descended to over two hundred meters below the surface of the ground, covered with lush lawn. It was one of the two major operations centers of the U.S. Treasury Department in Economic Warfare, and its anti-sneaker security was superior to Langley and Fort Meade (or so Colonel Fortzhauser claimed, and Hunt accepted it without batting an eyelid).

From here, planes could be seen descending on LaGuardia over Rikers Island; on such foggy evenings, laser beams of sky-high advertising flashed for miles from the Old College Point projector complex. The Program’s limousine was not allowed in the inner garage (another affront), and Hunt had the opportunity to admire the natural landscapes of the artificial world.

General Iris C. Kleist, EDC, a doctor of economics carved into a delicate mulatto, received them not in her office (which was somewhere deep in the Bunker’s operational sector) but in the building manager’s office, which he had temporarily vacated.

It was unclear whether this room included the NEti network—but since Hunt and Anselm had their doubts, they acted as if the Etiquette did indeed apply to them.

After fifteen minutes, they got down to business—the general had.

“One reason I should agree.”

“You know what we do. More than half the Program’s budget went through her accounts.”

“Yeah, bureaucracy and intrigue,” she snapped. “Have you ever read your own charter? ‘In order to support the defense of the country’s economy,’ it stands there. In the meantime, what do I hear from Colonel Fortzhauser?”

“What do you hear?”

She looked only at Hunt.

“General,” he began in a conciliatory tone “you cannot expect immediate benefits, this is a research, experimental program. Either there will be a breakthrough or there will be not. We are doing everything to...”

“Is there a single person among you,” she interrupted him in spite of NETi “who really understands what the Wars are about? Apart from my subordinates, whom you ignore on principle. What?”

“If you are asking whether we have an education in infoeconomics...” Anselm smiled.

“Only then would there be no hope that you will understand,” she snorted. “I am asking whether you understand the relationships at all.”

She stood over them with her hands behind her back and waited for an answer. Out of nowhere, Nicholas felt squeezed into an infantile form, a boy dragged out of a nap to answer in front of the class.

“That depends on what you mean by...”

She just sighed. She looked into space above the heads of the guests for a moment. Then she nodded pityingly.

“Maybe at least the basics. You should know at least some history. After all, it started in the twentieth century,” she said, sitting down, in a completely casual manner, on the edge of the desk, in front of a white-blanked LEDunk wall. “Some people search even deeper.”

“In the twentieth century?” asked Anselm.

“From what? From the development of the technology of destruction. But in

reality there was no awareness and no decision. So I won't give you a date, not even a date of the birth of the name and social awareness of it. The Economic Wars." She turned to type something on the terminal.

"Some interpret the matter according to the rules of historical convergence," noted Preslawny, clearly taking the burden of the discussion upon himself; he was certainly in a better mood than Nicholas.

"Wrong," Kleist cut in.

Having fastened her 3D-move glove, she turned to Anselm.

"You can only really look for it in times when the usefulness of your military potential has become inversely proportional to its size. You see, in domestic wars over a town or two guerrilla bands can shoot each other with Kalashnikovs, spit mortars and hit with RGPs —but what do you need a million-strong army for when you have nukes, orbital lasers, hectoliters of ultra-virulent chemical and biological weapons? Hmm? You can't gain anything this way anymore. There's no profit. Especially since the superpowers have gradually incapacitated themselves psychologically. Pacifist memes have become so deeply rooted in our culture that the electorate has finally stopped giving its consent to any war in which even one soldier —their compatriot or enemy —would die. Even if refusing the use force were to prove to have disastrous consequences —war does not gain acceptance. But then it was about purely political rivalry, the motivations of the struggle were ideological."

"War is a tool for protecting or increasing the state's assets. Period."

Anselm pursed his lips.

"What's all the fuss about? The inevitable consequences were already known almost two centuries ago. If I remember correctly, in 1914, a book by a certain Norman Angel came out from Heinemann in London called *The Great Illusion*, which predicted an analogous end to armed conflicts. These are all platitudes, obvious facts of history."

Hunt stared at Preslawny in amazement. How did he know such details? True, he had once taken a mini-course in infoeconomics...

"Obvious facts of history, yes," the general snapped, irritated. "The whole thing depends on the scale and technologies of implementation. The extreme

trend began when the possibility of starting and winning a war in the classic sense of the word, which would ultimately balance out positively, ceased to exist. Even if it was about taking over the richest oil fields on the planet, for example, the total costs of a military operation to seize and maintain control over them would significantly exceed any potential profits, considering the military potential of the parties involved.”

“That is, all the powers of Earth. But these super-armies essentially played a deterrent role, you cannot deny that.”

“In this sense, it was worth spending teradollars on them every year,” Kleist agreed. “Giving up on maintaining them and therefore also developing them —because standing still means retreating —would cost much more. But you can no longer gain anything thanks to their offensive use.”

“The correlation is the easiest to establish. But tracing the effect and cause...”

Kleist only raised an eyebrow. Preslawny responded with a smile.

“It is the strength of the economy that determines the strength of a given country’s army, not the other way around.” The general shouted at the computer, and colorful tables stuffed with statistics appeared on the wall. “The Russians learned this the hard way during the game of arms poker with Reagan. An example from the opposite pole: Japan, although contrary to appearances, was not completely defenseless, was in fact a military flea next to the Soviet elephant.”

“Japan was *de facto* part of the alliance...”

“The alliances of the 20th century were focused on defense against conventional attack, that is, brutal murder and destruction by force. I admit that their role, like the role of those super-armies, was undeniably important, no one denies that. However, in the meantime, a new factor began to take over, another plane of struggle —the economic one —was gaining importance, because conquests are still possible there.”

“But this is not new, it has existed for centuries!”

“Yes. But, I repeat, its role, due to the progress of civilization and the diminishing role of classic armed conflicts, has increased to such an extent that

we have the right to speak of a qualitative change. Let's compare the direct and indirect effects of the most severe economic conflict in the realities of World War I and in modern times: these are two different worlds."

It brought up another standard set of illustrative images on the wall.

"The first difference is the pace of struggle. At that time, the time from a decision to its first effects had to be counted in weeks and months, even years; today it is seconds. This is, of course, a matter of technology. The real breakthrough came with the computerization of communications, the virtualization of property rights and the automation of decision-making processes. The impulse carrying information about a drop or increase in the rate travels by fiber optic from country to country in fractions of a second. There is also no need to sign anything, roll tons of paper, move material shares, perform procedural acrobatics with the participation of people—which previously took hours and days. Now it is enough to change the record in the crystal memories of the computers selling, buying and the stock exchange—and these are nanoseconds. However, the greatest change in this field has been brought about by the automation of decision-making processes. The trend began with stock market expert programs from the nineties of the twentieth century. Originally, they were supposed to be just a kind of fuse in case of a sudden crash, because it is known that when the stock market is already crashing, everything is crashing and, at the speed of a diving fighter jet. In such conditions, a human broker often physically cannot keep up with placing orders, and the right ones at that—and the stress is terrible. Moreover, everyone often misses the beginning of the crash and the appropriate point on the charts is only indicated *post factum* by analysts. Therefore, the task of such a computer program was to patiently wait for the first symptoms of misfortune and then react by immediately selling endangered positions and switching to safe securities, or to join the trend and play short sales to cushion losses. The activation conditions—threshold values of indices or quotes of certain companies considered representative or exceptionally 'sensitive'—and the program's responses were entered into it in advance by people. In a short time, all major investors began to resort to the help of expert programs, and the competences of these programs also increased significantly: it was no longer just about rescue in the event of a collapse, but also about corrective reactions to changes in stock market trends, increasingly minor, increasingly less important. The tendency to automate decisions was irreversible, because anyone who withdrew from using this strategy would immediately put themselves in a losing position."

“So convergence after all,” Anselm noted.

“In such a broad sense, every historical process has a convergent character.” She shrugged. “Let’s remember that this strategy also had its dark sides. Several hundred such ‘machine investors’ operating simultaneously on one market—and it soon became clear that in fact there was only one market—constituted a self-detonating economic bomb: functioning thoughtlessly according to rigid algorithms, they were blind to the indirect consequences of their actions and constantly caused ‘decision avalanches’ that were disastrous for everyone. It looked like this.”

Here Kleist created an example record of an “avalanche” on the wall. The places where the programs were harnessed were marked on the charts as flying down with red pictograms. The animated, three-dimensional version showed the “cooperation” of several programs.

“The program of the most cautious of investors” said the general, pointing to the appropriate fragments of the image “and usually it was a pension fund, recognized the situation as dangerous—because it happened to be at this exact level that its vigilance threshold was set—and got rid of the papers, in its opinion, according to its creators, uncertain. This naturally aroused concern in several other programs. If the cumulative fluctuation of prices exceeded a similar threshold for one of them, then it too joined the drop, and if at the same time it was a program planned ‘as a greater gesture,’ it could behave more aggressively and go ‘for the trend.’ The drop in prices was increasing and affected the prices of related companies, because the programs preemptively sold out in blocks. A few such overlaps of the effects of the actions of one program with assumptions of the next one, that the stock exchange would suddenly, within minutes, fall into the deepest abyss of a bear market. Human brokers could only watch and curse.”

“Why didn’t they shut it all down for good?”

“That was no way out,” Kleist shook her head. “Whoever would attempt something like that would only gain that he would leave the declining Enterprises as the last and with the greatest loss. Indeed, according to this scenario, there were several serious stock market crashes. However, after the popularization of computers based on fuzzy logic, connecting networks, PDP and post-PDP, adaptive heuristics, incomparably more flexible and able to learn from mistakes—the threat from this side has clearly decreased. A direct consequence of the

above is also the complete exclusion of people from economic games.”

“So what are you actually doing here?”

“Only machines participate in the battle on the floor. We are left with the role of programmers and general strategy definers, supervisors, controllers and staff officers.”

“Are we out because we are slower?”

“Not only that. Although, indeed, speed disqualifies humans from the very beginning. But computers of this generation are also ‘aware’ of the existence of other investor computers and take their programs into account in their decisions. The struggle has thus climbed to a higher level, because these grandchildren of expert programs compete with each other already on the ‘meta-stock exchange,’ where the choices made depend not on the actual quotes and actual moves of adversaries, but on the totality of possible states and events, and each of them is weighed with the appropriate probability and expected value. At this stage, human stock market analysts are not able to understand and explain the actions of computers even after the fact. For example” Kleist pulled out the record of some old session and rewound the analysis “they find in a listing an obviously unsuccessful position, the purchase of some declining shares and selling them at a great loss. The logic of the game on the first level of the stock exchange clearly says that this is a mistake. However, when the game is played on the second level, the perspective of evaluation changes and the losses and profits from given moves are not estimated in relation to their omission (i.e.: ‘if he had not bought, we would have been ahead’), but in relation to the distribution of probable consequences of omission (‘if he had not bought, Etand would most likely have come down from KSCF, the red in City would have started and we would have lost one hundred and twenty mega’). The only proper way of analysis then is a holistic analysis. No person can encompass all the movements on the world’s market with one thought.”

She changed the displayed charts again.

“The second difference between the economic conflicts of the present day and the beginning of the twentieth century is the degree of tightness of economic ties in the most developed societies of that time and the sensitivity of those societies to the fluctuations of the economic barometer needle. I don’t have to convince you of the difference, do I?”

Hunt certainly didn't have to. He wasn't very interested in all this and would have gladly interrupted the general on any pretext, but he preferred not to alienate her in this way: he could tell when someone was truly in love with their work. What's more, by deciding to give that lecture, Kleist had imprisoned herself in a form: if they listened to it to the end, she simply wouldn't be able to refuse them a favor. A kind of barter: you let yourselves be poisoned by my ideas, I'll lend you the Bunker. So Hunt suffered in silence.

"Only by knowing all this can one try to understand the Economic Wars that have been going on for decades under this name." Dr. Kleist took a sip from her glass of colorless drink. "Well, it would be good to familiarize you with the basics" she sighed. "After all, you're supposed to work out some super-smart method of winning the Wars, it wouldn't hurt if you knew what it sowed."

So that was just the introduction! Hunt groaned inwardly. If she pulled out more charts, I might not be able to stand it after all...

"I'll really stick to the basics, because without a background in infoeconomics you wouldn't understand much anyway," she said, clearly reading Nicholas's face.

But Preslawny wouldn't be himself if he let it go. He bombarded her with dozens of questions, densely packed with terminology straight from *The Wall Street Journal*. The general had murder in her eyes, and so did Hunt. However, this was one of Anselm's methods of flirting: through irritation. Preslawny paid homage to the tradition of interactive flirting, he claimed that it added a thrill of emotion, this uncertainty: will he sue or not? The theory he propagated required that first he had to shake the woman out of a state of indifference toward the flirt. Then, Anselm maintained, it was only a step from hatred to fascination. Hunt considered such a Russian roulette to be a mental aberration. He kept telling Preslawny that he should seek treatment before it was too late.

In the end, Anselm probably did himself a favor, because before the two of them finished arguing, it was already dark night and the general briefly added: "So when can we settle down?" Nicholas could only give a date. However, Hunt did not approve of such methods: it was an unnecessary raising of an issue to a knife edge; if Kleist had been in a different mood, she could have easily slipped into an attractor of cold anger and ended up in a JAG investigation.

Walking through the empty parking lot, Hunt tapped his cane angrily.

"Take you anywhere..." he hissed at Preslawny. "You're an elephant in a china shop! You'd probably joke about condoms at the unsculpted! Aren't the compensation payments already hanging on your salary enough for you? Do you want to end up on welfare? Get a grip..."

"Look who the Devil brought in."

It was conspicuous, because it was the only limousine in the entire parking lot next to the Team's. A man with rust-colored hair was getting out of it, in the light of the river lasers, they could see him clearly despite the considerable distance.

"Bronstein."

"Notice," Hunt muttered, getting into the car, "she wouldn't let him inside either."

THE conference date was even worse. On the one hand, it had to take place quickly enough to implement any recommendations derived from its conclusions before there was nothing left to collect after the Monadic Wars (Schatz estimated three to four months to finally establish a new balance of power). On the other hand, Hunt had to give the invited guests time to make changes to their own schedules, to prepare credible legends, and for some of them also to familiarize themselves with quite thick studies on the theory and practice of mind exploration delivered by military couriers (all exclusively on paper!).

Finally, it was settled on the following weekend. The conference was to last three days—it would start on Thursday evening and end on Sunday. The participants would be accommodated inside the Bunker, in rooms designated for visiting VIPs and civilian analysts. The entirety, both against the sneakerheads of foreign intelligence and the local media, would be secured by McFly (now with a new face) on behalf of Fortzhauser's section, and the New York branch of the Secret Service, which was theoretically responsible for protecting the Corps' secrets, along with the FBI. In practice, the EDC had its own counterintelligence unit, and McFly took care of everything with the help of the people from the Bunker. Hunt once again had the impression well-known to professional bureaucrats: that he was putting his name on actions over which he had to give someone else direct control. A terrifying, terrifying feeling.

He devoted more time to the second undertaking announced at the meeting convened by Bronstein: using Krasnov's success with Estep. Estep (STP —Telepathy Stimulator) theoretically appeared already in Vassone's first works, as an artificial DNA reconfigurator that used model DNA of low mental immunology. Vassone theorized that there was undoubtedly a genetic distinguishing mark for people who were more than averagely susceptible to ambient mental fluctuations, because she had managed to find three more telepaths based on the DNAM of Americans extracted from NSA machines, with Hunt's permission. Her recommendations were therefore as follows: isolate all the genes responsible; create a safe universal template; construct an appropriate reconfigurator of human DNA based on it. Krasnov got to work on that. Everything indicated that he had finally succeeded. A container containing a dozen vaccines was delivered to the HQ by a military courier.

The question arose: what use should be made of them? Send the Estepers into orbit so that the monads in Labs 10, 13, and 17 would flatten them one by one during what Hunt considered almost absurd attempts to attract their attention? Return them to the capital to serve as a kind of canary in an early warning system against an attack by hostile monads? Allow Krasnov to continue his experimental research on the nature of thought? (Judging from Preslawny's report, Krasnov will continue it anyway.) Start training animalnas now, with great delay?

Sudden and unexpected wealth has made us sickly indecisive, Schatz concluded. Nicholas Hunt had organized the conference for the same reason: to have it in black and white, for which actions he would certainly not be accused of incompetence, inefficiency, negligence, etc. Meanwhile, there was still a week left until the conference, and he had to make a decision, the vaccines were lying unused in the Central safe, at any moment he could have twelve telepaths, healthy, mentally balanced, and not burdened with a schizophrenic childhood.

Slowly, he said to himself. Just don't make any sudden movements. A week is not that long, something can be simulated. That's a very real problem: where to get candidates for ESP? True, where? From death row? God forbid! Fortzhauser offered to quickly organize twelve volunteers from among the EDC officer cadre. Hunt said nothing, but the colonel must have read the answer in his impassive face: I'd sooner take those serial killers.

There was no hiding the fact that they needed people of unquestionable

loyalty, physically and mentally fit. Soldiers were the first to come to mind. Schatz, the cursed fountain of ideas, suggested the idea of using reserve officers who had undergone psychiatric examinations and were not bound by marriage contracts: those who regularly voted in elections and had direct dealings with Economic Wars (as petty stock market bandits, regular shareholders or fund speculators). *Nolens volens* Hunt finally agreed to this, because this particular option still required a certain preliminary selection of candidates, which gave an additional day or two.

Unfortunately, Moore had escaped like a lightning bolt, and on Monday morning, Hunt had a list of twelve names (paper only) on his desk. The second, reserve list had six more. All eighteen candidates had already been sworn in by their superiors—who themselves knew little more—and had voluntarily agreed to participate in the secret program. They were waiting for orders. They would be in New York within eight hours of their issuance.

Hunt had a distinct feeling that some kind of curse was upon him as he read this.

He called Moore.

"Your people should have screened them earlier."

"They did," said the Team's taciturn intelligence chief.

Hunt broke it down.

"Everything is written down. Five days until the conference. The Estep is in my safe. Bronstein is just waiting to stumble. In the meantime, I—I have to make a decision here now!"

Hell was opening up under him.

He called Vassone, Fortzhauser, Schatz, even Preslawny, Oirol and Krasnov. On a third sheet of paper he wrote down all the proposals. The nervous horror of futile hesitation completely exhausted him for the next two hours. Finally, he made the following orders: one to be sent into orbit, two to Washington, one to be placed at Krasnov's disposal, two to the CIA, which was desperately searching the world for alien training centers for animal monads. The rest of the Estepers would take up training their own animal monads under the direction of Marina Vassone. Hunt was very pleased with himself that he had managed to

shift at least this much responsibility to the beautiful doctor. If she refused —he calculated —she would exclude herself from the Team. If she had to answer for the fiasco —as a scientist, it would not affect her even one tenth as much as it would affect me. Logical. Right?

Moore, through one of EDC's dummy companies, had chartered the *USS Curtwaiter*, an old freighter commandeered by the Coast Guard for smuggling illegal immigrants, for a year and a half. Hunt flew out in a small, disposable city helicopter. The freighter would be suitable: worn enough not to attract morbid attention, but large enough to carry people and equipment. He descended into the ship's large, empty holds. Moore's guidebook described where everything would be with such precision and confidence that he had probably walked around the fully rebuilt *Curtwaiter* in OVR. Nicholas tried to imagine the future interior of this Team's marine lab. After sailing a dozen or so miles to the east, it would provide a purity of vision no doubt not as good as NASA's orbital labs, but sufficient for the first animal tests (that was the idea). Returning through the stinking bulkheads, Hunt caught sight of his own reflection in the steel surface of the hatch and stumbled, falling. The Moore man rushed to his aid. "What happened?" "Old refugee nightmares," Nicholas laughed artificially. It couldn't have been anything else. So had he experienced a direct leak of psychomemes from the minds of a truly haunted place? In the reports from Montana, however, it had presented itself slightly differently. Here, however, some overlap, coupling, crossing of currents had clearly occurred. In the reflection, he saw a man who only slightly resembled his own: in height, roughly in figure, and perhaps a little in facial features. But the other one was completely bald, deathly pale, hideously scarred, tattoos of thin streaks of blood covered his dirty skin, he had no mustache, his mouth was twisted in some kind of predatory grimace, he was dressed in the tatters of a long, black coat, and he didn't have a right hand —instead of it, a crooked lamp of quivering light stuck out of his sleeve. He stank terribly —and how Hunt knew this from the reflection in the hatch remained a mystery of psychomemetics. While still in the air, he had allocated the funds necessary for the renovation and transformation of the *Curtwaiter* into something like a reasonably habitable, autonomous research facility from the Team's budget for the newly formed Vassone section. Marina wouldn't have time to get it done and engage her six Estepers before the conference closed anyway.

She wasn't at HQ (he checked by phone), so he flew straight to the hotel to personally inform her of the decisions made in such an ordeal. In a direct

conversation, he would always have time to react somehow and downplay the troubles. Well, at least that's what he told himself, waiting for the door to Marina's apartment to open.

But when he had finally told her everything, and she had only smiled and nodded, then offered him a drink—he began to doubt the rules of the game. Had she expected it? Had she received a premonition? But what exactly? He hadn't thrown the spider out then and he didn't want to throw it out now. He had to understand: it doesn't mean anything. It's just selfishness. Surely he did.

On his way out, he made a vulgar allusion to the evening at De Aunche. Could he count on another one? Of course, yes, she replied, and slammed the door in his face. His nerves had been frayed enough by this whole walk, he couldn't afford another hour of empty anger. So as he rode back up to the roof, he laughed out loud. Charlotte was the same. What else could he expect? *Nihil novi sub NEti*.

In the HQ, he passed a group of military technicians who had just finished remodeling the largest room on the lower floor into a Monadic Wars monitoring center. They ran a fiber-optic cable to the Bunker, connected to the New York lines of the Treasury, State Department, and the Federal Reserve Bank (connections to the CIA, FBI, NSA, DLA, and HCI already existed). Data was sent to the HQ computers and to the completely LED-covered walls and ceiling of the room.

Fortzhauser took three veterans of the Economic Wars out of the Bunker to analyze data and interpolate the progress of the Monad Wars that were unfolding on the other side of the world from market anomalies. Their own round-the-clock staff kept the EDC, the CIA, and the Fed on their toes. Hourly reports, full of contradictory hypotheses, circulated between them on one-time-pass lines. The team received copies of all of them.

The three officers—a lieutenant, a lieutenant, and a captain—had arrived at HQ a half hour before all the electronics had been installed, straight from the Bunker, and they had no idea. They hadn't even had time to change. They were still in uniform. Their patches, shaped like Roman gold coins, proclaimed their affiliation: Economic Defense Corps.

Hunt thought that here was an opportunity to establish new hierarchies of loyalty. He called the three of them over, took their oaths, summed up the mat-

ter, gave each of them a copy of Vassone's and Schatz's papers, and obliged them to personally report any changes they observed on the fronts of the Monadic Wars. The poor bastards were so stunned they would have obliged to anything. Nicholas said goodbye, pleased that at least he had managed to do one thing today. It would take the colonel a moment to convert the infoeconomists back.

Under Foreign Banners

HE greeted everyone who came to the conference personally in the Bunker lobby, barely past the security gates. A handshake, a smile, a business card, Nicholas Hunt, I appreciate you finding the time, come this way, here's my number, please dial it, anytime, day or night, Nicholas Hunt, nice to meet you—an obscenely abbreviated NETi greeting ritual. EDC-hired limousines brought them from Kennedy, Newark, Giuliani and nearby LaGuardia, they materialized in droves. Krasnov arrived with his entourage (the Hacienda crew was the largest, fourteen people), insiders from the Washington distribution center arrived with their own advisers, and the entire top brass of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency showed up, including paid consultants from the Treasury Department during its review of the Vassone project. The heads of NOCS, the seventh reincarnation of SETI, showed up, and every institution currently involved in the Monadic Wars (at the passive monitoring level for now). Needless to say, the EDC itself and probably the entire Hunt Team showed up in large numbers. After comparing the original invitation list, it turned out that—despite the withdrawal of four planned participants—the conference would be attended by almost twice as many people as Nicholas had expected. Hunt was in a great mood, while McFly would tear his hair out if he didn't have a zero-cut. He almost jumped at Hunt's throat for those limousines alone.

The EDC gave up the seventh sublevel of the Bunker and some of the quarters on sublevels one and two for the conference. The welcome and introductory lectures by Vassone, Krasnov and Schatz will take place in the main seminar room, then the work will move to individual rooms, assigned according to the

size of the thematic working groups. Hunt himself formulated these topics, taking into account above all the usefulness of the expected conclusions from the discussions. The entire conference would be recorded by the microphones and cameras of the Bunker's internal network, and each group was to prepare a summary report at the end. Nicholas organized everything according to the rules of the art and could indeed be proud of himself. He was only afraid of Bronstein's arrival, but so far the red-haired savage had not appeared.

Having greeted the last of the arrivals and checked the passenger lists of the last flights, Hunt entered one of the Bunker's main elevators. "Minus seven," he asked. The elevators were very spacious, two walls were fully LED, and the news from the stock market screens of the EDC headquarters' tactical operations center were constantly scrolling on them. No great secrets could be read from them, such was simply the default elevator LEDs—but they affected the imagination and created the atmosphere prevailing in the Bunker. This was the eye of the storm, the front of this war, the trenches of a lone division held back by enemy fire.

Fate: after exiting the elevator on the seventh sublevel, Nicholas Hunt ran into a short woman in a uniform with the insignia of a general of the EDC. She turned around: Kleist. What turned out: she was waiting for him.

"A word, if I may."

She almost dragged him into the nearest free room (which was, by the way, the infirmary). After closing the door, she turned to Hunt.

He probably even expected her: before the elevator even stopped, the memory of General Iris C. Kleist invaded Hunt's stream of thoughts. (A local breakthrough from thoughts?)

After their first meeting, their mutual contacts were limited to telephone conversations, and God knows Nicholas did everything to keep it that way. From that meeting, he had acquired an image of the general as a competent, strong-willed person, and, worst of all, sincerely devoted to her work. He knew from experience how difficult it was to deal with such people. The fact that Kleist had almost thirty years of military training behind her did not make things any easier.

So far, while organizing the conference, he had somehow managed to avoid

high-level consultations by using the *fait accompli* method. Now I will have to pay for everything, Dr. Kleist judged from her narrowed eyes and the violence of her movements. On top of that, we are outside the NEti. Hang in there, Nicholas: another hard battle for competence.

However, he had misread her.

"We are the ones in the firing line," she said, finally taking her back off the door. "Not the Washington cliques, not the Capitol, not you and your mercenaries, Hunt. The first strike will be here, on the Bunker. On us," she emphasized. "On me. Do you hear me?"

"But, Madam General," Nicholas began, raising his hands in a defensive gesture, "it's not up to me, I'm not the one assigning the brothers, please go to Mr. Bronstein..."

"Mr. Bronstein belongs to another club," she snapped. "Mr. Bronstein plays a different game, a fucking provocateur, I don't know what he's counting on, a coup? I'm talking about the security of the country. Jesus, no one reacts anymore, words ground to dust... What am I supposed to do, who should I turn to, what should I appeal to?" She was clearly genuinely agitated. Or maybe she was just acting like that. She grabbed Hunt by the arm, shook him; a blatant breach of Etiquette. "One monad on the minds of my officers, and this will be a country of bankrupts!"

"I'm telling you..."

"You don't believe either, do you?"

"No, really..."

"Damn, you didn't believe from the start, not even that Vassone... Bronstein..." She let go of him and looked away. "Over there in Asia, governments are falling, nations are coming under foreign rule. It's coming sooner or later. What am I supposed to do then? What? What? Shoot myself in the head?"

Mumbling curses, she sat down on a stool pulled out from under a gurney. She took out and lit a nicotine cigarette. Hunt coughed. She gave him a murderous look. Still coughing, he smiled apologetically.

"A conference," she snorted. "He's having a conference."

"We need to know what's next..."

"I can tell you what's next. In two weeks, the mighty United States of America will sell itself to some Hong Konger or some other Transcaucasian, because you, you and your Krasnov, screwed up the job."

"Hey, wait a minute, I did everything in my power..."

"Bullshit. You did bullshit. You armored your ass. I thought that after what... But no, you're the same."

"Madam General..."

"What, still a smiley face? Christ, I can't look at you. Who found those fucking monads? Us: Vassone. Who was the first to realize the possibilities and threats? Us: Schatz. Who leaked all this? Us: you. Who wasted the most time? You. Because of whom, we are in last place in the race?"

"Doctor Vassone..."

"I have a hundred doctors here and somehow I can choose between hunting the mirages of theoreticians with their heads in the clouds and the interests of the state! But you have to have balls for that!"

"What, you found a scapegoat?" Hunt finally lost control of himself. "Now it's all going to go to me, right? Who have you already sold this version to?"

She raised her head and looked at Nicholas with new interest, suddenly calming down.

"I'm really curious about this," she muttered, blowing out carcinogenic smoke "how do you reason? That what? The Monadic Wars won't affect you alone? That you are safe, immortal? That evil will never happen to your country? That once they unleash those monads on us —then what? God will protect us? If it's true about this Vassone, you should know best. Go to our center, see what's happening in the Far East. It'll be the same here. Are you still not afraid? You're mentally ill, Hunt."

Hunt didn't know what to say. He twisted his face into defensive grimaces, each more pathetic than the next.

"So that's it," he finally attacked, forcing out a thick venom of irony. "A

patriot who has only the good of her country at heart? The only righteous one in a crowd of unjust people?"

"If I told you that I'm a bad person?" she hissed. "If I told you that —you'd believe it, wouldn't you? Or at least it wouldn't be anything abnormal. But to speak well of yourself, to proclaim yourself an altruist —that's indecent. Right? Right, Mr. Hunt? It is not polite to admit purity of intention in company. Because the dogma is: everyone is evil. This is the default assumption: every act begins with selfishness, every word with dark desire. Who could I be, then, if not an impudent hypocrite? But even if, even if," here Kleist lowered her voice to a whisper, "I still prefer hypocrites, because at least they admit the reason for the existence of some values, while you, you do not sin, because you have nothing to sin against."

"Beautiful. To listen to the unworthy, shit drips from the ears."

"Tell me: how did you imagine it? That a miracle would happen?" Through the billowing curtain of blue smoke, she gazed at Hunt with those black eyes of sculpted perfection so intensely that Nicholas, removed here from under NEti's protective hand, could only shrug and stammer uncertainly:

"I don't know anything, I acted according to my best judgment..."

"You really believe in your excuses."

"What do you want from me? I won't get you mantrics. Should I fall on my knees and beg for forgiveness that the others were luckier and chose animalnas?"

"You won't get mantrics," she repeated slowly.

"I won't get them."

"What can you get?"

He shrugged again.

"Estepers."

"Are these Krasnov's artificial telepaths?" she was surprised. "Why the hell do I need telepaths here?"

"For example, as an early warning system. The White House took some.

Fortzhauser didn't write to you?"

"That's what it's all about," she sighed. "The Monadic Wars are in full swing, but who's in charge? You can't figure it out. The EDC? The Department? Your Team? The CIA? DARPA? Who knows. Nobody."

"Who's in charge of Economics?"

"You're right, it pretty much overlaps." She jabbed a finger at Nicholas. "They should have subordinated you to the EDC from the start."

"You wish...!" Hunt laughed.

"Poor idiot."

He didn't know how to get out of this situation. Up there on the balcony, with Marina and the spider, at least he was under the net and knew the rules—but here? Maybe just walk out and slam the door?

"Promise me something, Hunt."

"What?"

"Promise me."

"Promise me...?" Laugh? Get mad? He stared at her in mortal amazement.

"You'll give me your word that you'll do anything to help me get us out of this mess."

"Of course, of course I'll help you, why wouldn't I?"

She took a deep drag.

"So, maybe you'll start by telling me about Fungus?"

"Fungus? What Fungus?"

"Goodbye."

She stubbed out her cigarette and threw it away, then, without even looking at the confused Nicholas, left the infirmary. The door slammed loudly.

IN the end, of course, he was late for Vassone's opening lecture. The conversation with General Kleist—more like a police interrogation, in fact—returned to him in echoes of individual sentences, and he replayed it over and over in his mind, trying to find some deeper meaning, without success. What was she trying to do? If she was trying to frame him for the defeat, why had she warned him about it? If she was really trying to forge some kind of alliance—why had she been hurling insults at him? What kind of fungus was she talking about?

The great hall was a third full. When Vassone finished and the lights came on, a forest of hands rose. Hunt watched from the upper entrance, who was asking what, and in what tone. He tried to locate the dividing lines. The hacienda was silent, and the most aggressive were the people from the State Department and the CIA, which was to be expected.

On her way out, Marina passed Nicholas in the doorway.

THEN, during Schatz's lecture, Imelda called Nicholas.

"Diplomatic work," she laughed in his ear. "I'm acting as a go-between again. Gaspar would like to see you. Would you hate it?"

He had always appreciated his sister for her unforced impertinence. It was often irritating under NETi, it also got Hunt into awkward situations, provoked absurd gestures of sincerity—but it always reminded Nicholas of the crazy days of their childhood, still in their mother's Asian Pacific palace, when they lived together, before Nicholas was sent away to an exclusive school. In those days, the sun was brighter, the sky was bluer, the evenings were so long, the nights mysterious... he simply couldn't be angry with her.

"What about it?"

"Oh!"

"I see. When?"

"Today. Tomorrow. Something is making him nervous."

"Maybe he'll call himself."

"Keep joking."

The ghosts of the ECHELON project still haunted the circles of power, growing stronger despite (or rather, thanks to) subsequent official denials, and frightening people with the vision of a system that would intercept every signal and break every code. Even if hundreds of specialists had guaranteed unbreakable, noise-coded burner systems, it did not diminish the suspicion of telephone users. If such things were public domain, they reasoned, imagine what they had in store...!

“Okay, I’ll stop by.”

“When?”

“I’ll make an appointment.”

It was getting late, and some of the audience had leaked out of the room before old Krasnov even took the podium. Schatz left without interrupting the loud discussion he was having with three young sculpted, among whom Nicholas recognized as one of the Berkeley theorists who had given their opinion on the project, a philosopher, I think. He checked the time. Ten-seventeen. He planned to get Krasnov himself and, if possible, Stimmel, the President’s assistant to the National Security Adviser, later today.

Another call.

“Hunt.”

“It’s Hammer, sir.” Hammer was one of the Central Officers on duty. “As you know, we routinely monitor open NYPD communications, and Moore’s machines filtered out information from the intercepted calls about an accident of the cutter carrying people to the *USS Curtwaiter*, moored in international waters. Apparently there was some kind of malfunction in the control computers, the cutter was rammed by the Oceania-flagged container ship *Brasco*. The only unconfirmed casualty list is the cutter’s captain, di Piena, we had him on a blind contract, sir. No details yet on the injuries or lost cargo. We’re covering up our involvement through the local Bureau, it doesn’t look serious, fortunately we’ve managed to develop the legend of a casino.”

“The passenger list?”

”We don’t have it yet. We’re downloading it from the police computers as we go.”

“Let me know right away.”

“Yessir.”

She didn’t answer the phone. He went to the nearest room with a sensor terminal. The apartment’s computer stubbornly displayed a standard business card. Calls to the hotel staff were unsuccessful.

He drove to the Bunker parking lot level, got into his BMW and gave the address of Vassone’s Hotel on Park Row.

He stood in front of her apartment door for five minutes —she wouldn’t open it. When it finally opened, she wasn’t there.

He entered: silence, darkness.

“Doctor...?”

Not even a sound of movement.

He reached the living room and saw her there in the city lights streaming in through the open balcony door. No visible injuries. She was wearing denim shorts and a Kurt Cobain T-shirt. She sat motionless on the edge of the sofa, knees together, hands clasped, hunched, her gaze fixed somewhere on the carpet, two meters from her feet. Her softened face trembled in ugly spasms. She was crying.

Hunt stopped in mid-step and stayed that way, because he had no idea how he should react. This wasn’t Vassone, this wasn’t Dr. Marina Vassone. All he had ready were questions. Are we under the net? Are the cameras on? “If I’m invading your privacy...” he began, clearing his throat.

”Mike,” she sobbed. ”Orleinne...”

What should I do? Call a psychoanalyst? Call an ambulance? Holy shit.

What if this isn’t just post-accident hysteria? What if it’s another monadic attack? Or not even a new attack —but simply a continuation of the previous one? Long-term effects... part of the monad had eaten into her mind, the psychomemes had taken hold, she had ”remembered” them, who knows what was going on in her head now, memory was governed by the rules of Darwinian natural selection, a whole new personality could have grown from a few psychomemes,

it was not a stable system, it never was. A war was now brewing in her head between Marina Vassone and that young child murderer. Mike...? Her husband? Her son? The one she killed? Who should I talk to? The forty-seven-year-old doctor of cognitive science with a mind like a differential equation, or that girl from Nova Scotia who can't handle her remorse? "Do you know who I am?"

"Piss off, Hunt. I killed them both."

Now that was complete paranoia. His hands dropped. Nicholas sat down on the arm of the chair, absentmindedly smoothing his mustache. She had completely mixed up everything, a complete mess in her head. A telepath could handle it, a telepath has had it since birth, and even earlier—but her? Besides, even telepaths don't have monads with entire alien psychomeme structures. The Fourth must have caught a large part of the child murderess' mind in orbit—maybe she really died, and it all went into her mind? How did she die? Did she commit suicide? What is Marina turning into here, some kind of psychopath? Jesus Christ, this is turning into a trashy horror movie, *redrum*, *redrum*, *redrum*...

If only not now! The Monadic Wars, A conference in progress, The *Curtwa-iter*...

He raised the signet ring to his lips.

"Give me that son of Vassone's who called us from Boston" he said, having called the switchboard.

"Jason Vassone."

"Yes, sir."

"Here you go."

"This is Nicholas Hunt," he introduced himself to Jason. "Do you remember me?"

"Yes, I think so, she told me to call you then."

"Exactly. Please listen to me. Your mother is not doing well. She had an accident, but that's not it, physically everything is fine. It would be good if you flew to New York as soon as possible and met her."

“I’m in New York.”

“Excuse me?”

“She invited me... It’s personal.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“Yes.”

“Please come. Now. I’m at her place. It doesn’t look so good. You’ll see.”

“Does this have anything to do with...?”

“Unfortunately. Please hurry.”

She was still sitting and crying. The tears had stopped flowing, only her ragged, rapid breathing and facial grimace remained, and the mechanical back and forth rocking. Hunt saw the first signs of catatonia in this and was getting scared. Now, for the first time, he was also touched by personal fear, the fear of losing another person, not the benefits of using them. He was terrified of this fear. It’s childish. Let’s get a grip, damn it. I’m an adult after all. What good is having sex with her. Not with her last. Let’s not let our emotions get the better of me. I’m not addicted to her. I don’t need her. I’ll survive.

But aesthetics are not subject to rationalization. He looked at her, shaken, crying, in those clothes that didn’t suit her at all, with her white hair wildly tangled, her nails bitten —and his chest tightened with regret for that Marina Vassone, who had made him shiver with one look from her pale blue eyes, one distinguished movement of her slender hand.

”I didn’t want to, my God, I didn’t want to...”

If it weren’t for the net, he would have gone up and slapped her in the face with all his might, and a second time, and a third time, until she threw herself at him with her fists.

Meanwhile, he sat and watched. The silence in the apartment. Her breathing. The noise of the city. From this place, from this angle —he couldn’t see her face anymore. He didn’t know whether to be happy about it or not. Because if she finally looked back at him... What kind of face would that be then? It filled him with irrational fear. As if he was waiting for the lid of the vampire’s coffin to be

lifted.

The phone rang again.

“This is Schatz. Where are you?”

“What is this about?”

”I need to talk to you immediately.”

“We’ll talk at the Headquarters. Or at the Bunker.”

“When will you be here?”

“I don’t know.”

“No, no! Tell me where you are. I’ll come to you. If it turns out that I’ve bothered you unnecessarily, you can throw me out of the Program.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll resign myself.”

“But what are you doing here...!”

“It’s Important.”

“Can’t we talk over the phone?”

“No, not really.”

“Okay, I’m at Vassone’s.”

But Jason arrived first.

Despite the legal insurance, the boy immediately began to headed deeper into the apartment, Hunt grabbed him by the arm and stopped him in the hallway,.

“Wait,” Nicholas hissed. “You have to know that she...”

“Let me go!”

“Wait! She’s not your mother anymore! I mean —we don’t know who she is.

We have to..."

"What? What are you saying?"

"She remembers part of someone else's life, someone else's personality is fighting her, you're her son and..."

"Are you saying," he childishly widened his eyes at Nicholas "that she's possessed?"

"Whatever you want to call it, whatever you call it. I'm trying to warn you. I brought you here because you belong to her real life and you can help her repress conflicting memories. So be careful what you say. Don't suggest anything related, even remotely, to, um, infanticide."

Jason stared at Nicholas like he was crazy, astonishment fighting for the better with horror. Hunt held his gaze. Finally, he let go of the boy's arm and nodded toward the living room.

They entered together. Marina was sitting in the same place, in the same position. Except she had stopped moving and was not saying anything. Hunt did not take his eyes off Jason's face and saw the unmistakable shock on it. A strange woman; where is my mother?

"Mom?"

She looked. But what was that look —empty and dead. Behind the emptiness —cold despair.

"What happened?" Jas asked in a measured undertone. He approached and sat on his heels opposite Marina, so that she could no longer look away from him. "What happened? What is going on?"

"When did you..."

"Yes?"

She began to bite her thumbnail. From immobility she went into nervous trembling: quick head movements, glances thrown blindly like spinning, here and there, sudden changes of facial grimace. "I'm so sorry," she whispered through her hand.

“For what?”

Hunt waved at Jason from behind her: don’t ask, don’t ask.

“Jason,” she mumbled.

“Yes?”

“Jason.”

“I’m here.”

“Jason, I...”

“Oh Jesus, Mom, but tell me what’s going on...”

With a sudden sob that erupted somewhere deep in her chest, she embraced him, pulled him, hugged him; chin on her shoulder, lowered eyelids, new tears from under them. Between successive bursts of tears —torrents of words whispered to a point four or five inches from Jason’s ear. Hunt understood nothing of this confession and knew that he shouldn’t understand: at that moment it wasn’t Dr. Vassone, it wasn’t the Marina with very beautiful breasts and elfin legs —but mother, and he didn’t know her, he would never know her, she was a complete stranger, she would be a stranger regardless of that child murderer’s monad infection.

He went out onto the balcony. He lit a cigarette. He raised the signet ring to his lips.

“Schatz?”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“Let this be something really important.”

“You must be really out of your mind, if you’re talking in such old memes.”

“Don’t be smart.”

New York at night is a city of lonely people, just look at it, it’s a fortress, here people live against, in opposition to, such metropolises accumulate and catalyze anger, envy, aversion, fear, from the level of thought they must appear as real gigagenerators of negative feelings. Because so many people crowded

in one place can't induce anything else. Number Five was right, he was right: it's blackness, a huge, thick, terribly stinking blackness, which floods everyone, even if we're not aware of it, even if we're not telepaths and the healthy immune systems of our minds don't allow us to be infected with foreign psychomemes—but with such great pressure something always seeps through, osmotically, subliminally—aren't most of us susceptible to other people's moods? Aren't we affected by the psychological attitude of the crowd? This blackness finally wins, after months, years, it presses into our minds, infects them, changes the code of thought: the city triumphs. Isn't the reputation that NYC enjoys all over the world deserved? On the tops of these skyscrapers there should be banners made of cloth blacker than raven feathers. Beksiński, Beksiński.

Movement behind him. He looked back. Jason was beckoning to him from the threshold of the balcony. Hunt put out his cigarette and stepped back into the living room. Marina wasn't here.

"I think she's better now," Jason said quietly, not looking Nicholas in the face.

"Has she recovered?"

"You know, I don't think at all..."

He pushed him aside and went into the next room. Marina was blowing her nose into tissue paper. She gave Nicholas an uncertain half-smile. Her eyes were red, she looked, tilting her head slightly.

"Doctor..." Hunt began.

She burst out laughing.

"Doctor, huh?" she giggled, wagging her finger at him reproachfully. "Doctor? You're a real machine, Nicholas!"

"If you feel well..."

"Yeah, I'm sure I feel great! Leave me alone, can't you see I'm barely hanging on?"

Hunt was irritated.

"Because Four's monad infected your mind and you're still fighting the psy-

chomemes of that brat who starved her little brats! I don't know who's winning! Get your act together, damn it!"

She winked at him.

"It's nice to know you care about me. Be so kind as to bring me a glass of rum, would you?"

He grabbed her by the shoulders, looked into her eyes —and they were still the same eyes: bright blue, ice in the Arctic Sea, when the cold sun was high in the polar sky.

"Who are you?"

"Well, Nicholas," she grabbed him by the cravat, patted his cheek "I am still the same person."

"The same, but not the same!" he growled. "There was a turning point, on that cutter, during the disaster or already here. You were breaking down before my eyes, I saw it, I felt it, and I have no idea what came of it all. Or rather: who. I would like to see your handwriting. Well, write something. I will run it through a graphology program, and we will make a comparison."

"Give me a break. I know I've changed. But don't look for any demons or unclean spirits in this. What about you? We're under the net, Nicholas. You're breaking Etiquette by a good few dozen mega. You're ruined. So? Who are you?"

"You won't sue me."

"Do you trust me?" she gently touched his cheek with her lips, tugged at his mustache with her teeth. "Really? Do you trust me?"

He couldn't smell any exotic flowers, only her own scent, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, the sea water had washed away any perfume. He slid his hand under her black Kurt Cobain T-shirt. Her skin was warm, slightly sweaty.

"Mr. Schatz has come," Jason said from the threshold of the room.

"Who are you inviting here..." Marina muttered, stepping away and reaching for another tissue.

Hunt returned to the living room. Schatz was waiting patiently by the door. Nicholas pointed him to a side office, NEti anyway.

There was a wooden desk stylized in a late nineteenth century style of the and, without thinking, Hunt sat down in the armchair behind it. Schatz acknowledged this with a dry half-smile. He sat down opposite in a chair *à la* Thomas Chippendale.

"I'm listening," Nicholas said.

"Is there a screen somewhere here?"

"I assume the windows are LED." Hunt waved his hand toward the windows.

"Do they have a channel for implants?"

"They should. Get to the point. Do you want to show me some movies?"

"A little simulation to illustrate. I understand that I should be brief."

"So be brief, damn it."

"Hmm. Yes. Anselm Preslawny assigned me a study you ordered on sects and all similar movements before he was assigned to the Hacienda. It was clearly stated that this is not a scientific compendium or a detailed analysis. You wanted a collection of explanatory theories, maximally synthesizing. I am afraid that I did not follow this instruction very precisely, because I will limit myself here to one theory. But, in my opinion, it is true. It explains everything. Or almost everything."

"I am generally distrustful of theories that explain everything. Usually they do it so well that every element fits into them and are fundamentally unfalsifiable."

"Please judge for yourself. You wanted to know the reason for the observed increase in popularity of apocalyptic, ufological or suicidal sects over the last hundred and several decades. This is a continuous process, although it is constantly accelerating, in geometric progression. Its roots go back to the first half of the twentieth century, at least then it was already possible to distinguish characteristic features in individual parareligious movements. Then they gradually grew stronger, their membership grew, more and more people were indoctrina-

ted, more and more people accepted their myths as their own. The number of acts of violence, rituals related to mutilation of the body or even murder or suicide also grew, although to the members of these sects it is not understood as murder, but merely as liberation from the body. Now... a moment." Schatz entered the half-blind, opened a connection to the apartment's computer, darkened the windows and displayed a graph on them. "Please look. This curve shows the number of such 'releases' on a global scale: how many there are in each half-year, from World War II to the present. Of course, the data from the initial period is not complete due to the information blockades at the time and frequent misclassifications due to ignorance of the phenomenon itself."

"If this were a stock quote curve, I would buy them blindly."

"This one doesn't show that, but when broken down into months, weeks and days, we get a very interesting graph, on which certain fluctuations are already noticeable, especially if we limit ourselves to the last half-century, for which we have much better documentation. Of course, the first thing I did was to put an instruction into the computer to find any regularities in these successive intensifications and weakenings of bloody faith. It found none, even when it ignored the independent variable of constant growth. Then I told it to look for correlations with other sociological processes. In the long run, there were none. At that time I recommended taking into account all detectable parallel processes, including changes in average daily temperatures, the level of global gross income, and similar indicators."

"It certainly didn't help either. I bet many have tried such comparative methods before."

"Very likely."

"So what is your discovery?"

"You see, I knew about the mind. The others didn't."

"Oh, the mind..."

"Don't frown. Remember when I asked at 'Santuccio' whether the laws of physics apply to her? Vassone couldn't answer me. This is an absolutely crucial issue. Well, I found indirect evidence that the answer to this question is "no." A few hours ago in the Bunker, one of the EDC analysts accidentally slipped me

the last element. I checked and everything clicked. I'm telling you, it was as if an electric current had passed through me. In the footnotes to Vassone's treatise there is a reference to twentieth-century research on the so-called "memory of form." It was a theory considered completely crazy at the time, no one had any idea what to do with it, although the results of experiments seemed to confirm it. Do you know? Every problem, once solved, is easier to solve again, even though the solver has no idea of the achievements of the forerunner. It is easier to learn a melody, a poem, a dance figure, when someone has already learned them before you, and the more people know them, the easier they come to your mind, and so on. This is one of the mutations of the theory developed in the twentieth century by a certain Rupert Sheldrake, a biochemist and cell biologist. While growing plants in his laboratory in India, he conceived *A New Science of Life*, in which he presented his theory of the morphogenetic field, or shape-forming resonance. It is worth noting that he wrote it under the influence of the holism guru, Bede Griffiths. They must have had some breakthroughs of intuition... Although the thing basically began as an attempt to supplement post-Darwinian genetics—but soon, as a universalist theory, it also extended to the culture sphere, and after years, it resulted in all this marketing memetics. In any case, the resonance was supposed to apply to every form, including intentional entities. Of course, we know that the thing is simply about the osmosis of psychomemes, but at that time it was an inexplicable absurdity. However, in an attempt to explain it, or rather falsify it, countless experiments were conducted, some of which took place simultaneously in two opposite points on Earth—this is already a distance with a measurable delay in the flow of information. However, a series of experiments conducted at a distance: Earth—Mars should be considered truly significant. The third Mars expedition had a hard time with this. Later, statistical analysis of their results showed that a rat going through a maze on Mars made it easier for a rat on Earth to find its way out of a maze with an identical layout, even though theoretically it was still outside the cone of events of the Martian part of the experiment. Of course, all these differences were small and detectable only in a large set, because these rats did not have any telepathic abilities. Nevertheless, it is proof that the psychomeme wave travels through the mind faster than light."

"But what are you actually getting at? Because I don't get it."

"Please look." The graph on the windows changed. Now a white snake ran through them, broken down in time into several multi-colored components, described below with neat pictograms. In the window next to it, it translated

into some complicated epicyclic rotations, also with a dense description. Does it remind you of anything?

“With interpolative analysis of a pulsar signal from a multiple system.”

“Exactly. But there is no pulsar in this system. This is Sheratan, beta Aries.”

“Sheraton?”

“Sheratan. A star, not the hotel. Don’t let the memory of the old form overwhelm you!” Schatz laughed.

Hunt watched the computer simulation playing on the dark windows of the office with an inscrutable expression.

“Please speak, I’m listening.”

“*Kaukab al-šádratain*, that’s what the Arabs called it: ”the star of two signs.” In Hipparchus’ time, the beginning of the year was determined by it, that is, the spring equinox. Only one component is visible to the naked eye, in Hertzsprung-Russell: A5V. You can go out and see, it has recently risen, low above the horizon, north, north-east, two coma, seven magnitudes. In fact, it has a companion. That one has planets. So far, this European lunar dispersive telescope has found four. The graph you see is a graphic analysis of the annual motion —of course, we are talking about the Sheratan year —of the second one. As far as I know, the commission gave it the name Nefele, which has something to do with the beliefs of the ancient Greeks about the constellation Aries. Sheratan A and Sheratan B orbit their common center of mass in one hundred and seven Earth days. That is the blue component. Below you have the movement of the planet itself, its orbit does not even roughly look like an ellipse. Hence, the apparent lack of regularity. The correlation was found only after comparing it with the entire astronomical data. The points indicated by the arrows are the moments of conjunction between Sheratan A and Sheratan B with respect to Nefele. In the first graph, which I will run in time here, on the left, they are reflected in steep peaks of a sudden increase in the number of ritual ”bodily liberations.” We also have small fluctuations related to planetary conjunctions in Sheratan, but they actually fit within the margin of error of the chaotic growth constant.”

“Do you really want me to say that?” Hunt snapped. “Your theory assumes

that on this Nefeale there live some beings whose psychomemes, traveling through thought faster than light, influence the minds of people on Earth and drive them to such madness. Is that so? Occam's razor must have really gotten blunt lately."

"Please give counterarguments. You probably won't deny the correlation."

"First of all," Hunt sighed heavily "the intensity of psychomeme radiation from such a distance..."

"A mistake" Schatzu smiled. "You assume involuntary and, so to speak, the 'naturalness' of influence. Why is that? Couldn't monads also have arisen from the thoughts of the Nefeleans? Plant, stationary; and animal, mobile; and neuromonads. Devil knows whether these Nefelean are even aware of their existence, whether the weakest among them are at least telepaths, maybe they are primitive people, some alien cavemen. I don't know, it doesn't matter. The whole thing takes place on the level of thought. Neuromonads do not need a developed civilization of material psycho-meme generators to come into being."

Hunt was silent. He turned his gaze away from Schatz and was now looking at those graphs, winding across the dark windows with irregular sinusoids, announcing the fall of sacred truths with dry mathematics.

"Believe me," Ronald continued "I tried to find a hole in it myself. But everything here fits perfectly, to every variant. Even the one with the highly developed Nefelean civilization and their conscious influence through thought —because Sheratan is fifty-two light years away from us, and the first radio signal was sent on Earth somewhere around the end of the nineteenth century. We have to watch how this sphere reacts after hundred and over a dozen years of our screaming from the times when we had not yet moved to HFT technologies will pass through space; calculate what the return intervals of our Noise Window are... Damn, how everything fits here. These psychomemes, from which the Nefelean monads are built —are so alien that the human mind does not know what to do with them and it is difficult for it to include them in the pool at all. Who are the most numerous among the founders of these sects? Science fiction writers and people with broken personalities, malleable, defenseless minds, shaken by the psychedelic visions of drug addictions: because they have already 'gotten their wires crossed.' How it looks in Vassone's model: The psychomeme or the entire psychomeme structure seeps into the human mind. Then we have Darwinian natural selection: mutations and multiplications and the rejection of the unadapted. So, purely Nefelean psychomemes are rejected out of hand as

completely unadapted, too alien. But sometimes, in a "friendly environment," they survive and gradually some more distant recombinations of them begin to dominate. What do we get then? Ufological prophets who themselves do not even know what they know. Let's drink the poison, brothers, a ship will come and take our souls! Of course, not souls, but psychomemes, and not a ship, but monads. This, of course, is indirect evidence that the Nefeleans are perfectly aware of the existence of thought and its properties. But these sectarian beliefs, rituals, twisted explanations of visions sent by God to their gurus... What better could you expect, these Nefelean could be some fucking chlorine-breathing octopuses. What will a cat do with human psychomemes? What will a tiger loaded with a package of human memories of how to operate a computer give as an output? Do you understand, Mr. Hunt? That's the explanation."

Hunt absentmindedly rubbed his mustache with the back of his hand.

"Hmm, but this process is accelerating, there are more and more of these nutcases, the curve is hitting the ceiling —why?"

"I have a few hypotheses," Schatz shrugged. "Most likely, the constant, uninterrupted psychomeme radiation of the Nefeleans is slowly changing the general human mentality, bending it toward the Nefelean, and subsequent psychomemes are adapting more easily. Of course, this works on a large scale, statistically, using a completely evolutionary method. That's why this graph looks the way it does."

"Exactly: why does it look the way it does? Let's say you proved the correlation —but where did it come from in the first place?"

"You're asking me for the impossible, Mr. Hunt" Schatz snorted. "How can I explain the genesis of individual features of Nefelean psychomemes, for example, inducing self-destructive activity during the conjunction of their suns? Maybe it has something to do with their biology, their way of reproduction? Or maybe it's their customs? We also celebrate Christmas at a specific time every year. But all of these are just desperate analogies, blind guesses based on a single-element set of examples."

"Christmas?" Hunt frowned. "Do you think this could be a manifestation of their... religion?"

"I don't know what it's a manifestation of!" Schatz was irritated. "We, hu-

manity, also radiate our culture, physiology, science, the shape of our civilization —ourselves —through our minds. Those Nefeleans could have become completely human there during that time.”

”I doubt it,” Hunt muttered, nervously stroking his mustache. ”Let me remind you of what you told me yourself: not to assume that influence was involuntary. It seems much more likely to me that they are aware of the existence of minds and monads and have come to an understanding with their neuromonads and that all of this is planned and deliberate. This is not radiation, Mr. Schatz. These are Nefelean neuromonads.”

”Planned, you say,” Ronald shook his head. ”Deliberate. So what is their plan? What could be their goal in such actions?”

”Can’t you see?” Hunt laughed mockingly. He got up from behind his desk, opened the office windows (they still had Ronald’s colorful simulations spinning on their panes) and waved his hand at the nighttime New York. ”We have fallen victim to an invasion!”

SCHATZ left after bowing elegantly to Marina, who waved him goodbye. He had difficulty masking his surprise.

Jason was sitting in a deep armchair in the corner of the living room, gloomily sipping a beer, watching everyone from under his brow and saying nothing.

Hunt poured himself a Scotch and went out with the glass to the balcony. He carefully avoided looking at Marina, who had settled comfortably on the sofa and was fiddling with something on her LEDpad. She smiled encouragingly at Nicholas as he passed by, and at the sight of his grimace twisted face, she only raised her eyebrows.

On the balcony, the wind ruffled Hunt’s hair and fluttered his unbuttoned jacket. Hunt leaned against the balustrade, looked down into the semidarkness outlined by hieroglyphs of cold and hot light, covered with shadows that overlapped many times. The nightly hum of the metropolis went in waves, washing Nicholas with the dirty foam of sounds. Hunt didn’t even look around for Sheratan, he wouldn’t have recognized it among the other stars anyway, besides, the city sky was too crowded, there was almost no room left for stars.

He noticed that the hand in which he held the glass was trembling slightly. In fact —he was mortally terrified.

This is an invasion, there is no doubt about it, it is an invasion and there will be no other, kilometer-long ships will not descend from the sky, star monsters will not swarm the streets, there will be no colored fire and picturesque destruction, no one will murder us, no one will take us into slavery, the Sun will not collapse and planets will not explode, the Moon will not fall to Earth and a message from the depths of space will not sail on electromagnetic waves. Don't expect day zero, don't expect pathetic appeals on television. You won't notice. You won't see. You won't hear. You won't feel it. What can you do —observe the changes in fashion. Observe the changes in fashion, their ebb and flow, how the vector of the resultant mentality of humanity deviates. Listen to the music and lyrics of hits. Read the bestsellers. Watch the most popular films. Analyze the evolution of clothing. The body: the evolution of the phenotype, because it is also subject to fashion; the ideals of beauty are a little different every year, genetic sculptors encode the aesthetic dominants of the day in biology. Savor the sound of the language, collect emerging neologisms and note subsequent re-interpretations of idioms. Savor the sound of the language: it, a reflection of the existing social contract, will tell you in which direction the game of meanings is heading. Walk the streets and absorb the shape and color of advertisements. Look at newly erected buildings: in which direction architectural trends are drifting. Above all, be alert to changes in behavior, catch the smallest deformations of convention, transformations of custom —how they live, how they die; how they hate, how they love; how they work and how they play; how they react to each other. Don't be fooled by their commonness, their children's laughter, the similarity of their reflections in the mirror: eyes, ears, nose, mouth; don't be fooled. It doesn't matter. Don't be fooled by the fact that you understand them —that they are your brothers and sisters, that they raised you and that you are raising them. It doesn't matter. Be vigilant. Be suspicious. Don't underestimate anything. Perhaps the way your neighbor waters his flowers, the words of a nursery rhyme, will prevail. Absorb every detail, assign a role to each detail: this is a sword, and this is red-hot iron. Do you like these cookies? Do you like the smell of this perfume? Does this virtual game excite you? Are their dreams your dreams? Their dreams? Their fears? Be vigilant; don't underestimate; observe; analyze. Maybe you will be the first to meet the Aliens.

II

The Question Collector

FLATTEND on the floor, splattered with fresh blood, with the cold muzzle of the Corpse-Thief pressed against the back of his head by a Shadow, Hunt will curse: “What are you on about, you brass cretin, to ask about this Fungus at all? Why are you digging for some imaginary truth? Yes, and you will die here for real, knowing so much...!”

How proud he was of his own cunning then!

“So, how’s it going with Fungus?” Krasnov asked as if nothing had happened on the second day of the conference, on Friday, in the middle of an alcohol-fueled conversation with the Russian in his quarters at minus two in the Bunker.

“Oh, I don’t know” the old man waved his hand. “Per-Mueller pulled it out of the archives, he’ll probably give a lecture to the group, you can listen, it seems he dreams of the Moon.”

Of course, Hunt didn’t mean anything, but he remembered every word. Per-Mueller, archive, Moon. Check which group.

Meanwhile, Krasnov went back to the bar (it had been specially stocked for the conference participants; Hunt took good care of his rats).

“I always thought that scientists ran on hydroxides,” Nicholas muttered, pouring himself a grapefruit cocktail.

“I have to maintain national stereotypes,” Krasnov huffed, having downed a glass of liquid of an incriminating chemical group.

"Tell me, professor, what are you actually doing there at the Hacienda? Poor Anselm keeps banging his head against some confidentiality barriers. Aren't the Monadic Wars the absolute priority? Why didn't you give us this Estep earlier?"

Krasnov collapsed into his armchair with a sigh.

"I let him go too early anyway. This is a test series, far from perfect."

"I read the specifications," Hunt protested. "You guaranteed non-conflicting genes."

"Yes, but I'm not sure if we don't lose more than it's worth *summa summa-rum* by avoiding uncertain couplings. We had to rely on the DNAM of Vassone's natural telepaths, we acted like a tailor, not an architect: we cut out the minimum sequence, profiled the RNAditor according to it... We don't understand the mechanism. The weakening of the mind-thought barrier is lesser than in Vassone's Numbers. That is: on average, without taking into account genotypic variance. We have to consider what we're throwing it at. Because who are you going to inject Estep into? The Sculpted, right? That limits it too."

"How the hell do you know that? What tests could you have conducted?"

"There will be talk about it in the Estep group, check it out."

"Anyway... why the hell were you digging in Efes? Everyone here is jumping at me for underestimating the threat and not making enough effort, and you at the Hacienda..."

"What do you mean: we at the Hacienda?" Krasnov was irritated.

"You're just sucking up subsidies, that's what!" Hunt snapped, partly pretending, partly really unnerved by the impudence of the old unsculpted.

"Of course we are!" the Russian cackled. "you're in pain! Envy is crushing!"

"The Monadic Wars are upon us, you're supposed to produce, not build new laboratories..."

"Blessed be the foresight of decision-makers!" Krasnov cried, raising his crooked hands above his head. He gritted his yellow teeth. "Pfft! Pfft! *American! Mind your business!* I'm giving you victory in the Economic Wars on a plate, and you, blind as moles, see no other way, only defeat is destined for you."

“Don’t spit on me here, Krasnov. Go back to English syntax.” Nicholas chose the tone of a cold bureaucrat from his handy arsenal. “Remember where the money comes from. Remember what this is about. Because it seems to me that your sclerosis has also affected what you have written to us.”

“Tell me, Hunt: don’t you understand either, or are you just pretending? After all, Estep and monads are only a way to win the Economic Wars, one of the possible ones. Because isn’t that what this is all about? Isn’t that why it pays you to pump mega and mega into this project? But it turns out that once again you have turned the means into the goal! After all, Estepers are an obvious shortcut to victory in the Economic Wars! But you have clung to this idea and will not let go. If I were the one residing at the Team and that Vassone’s cold ass was stuck in the desert, it would probably be the other way around. Attack...”

“Don’t judge everyone by yourself.”

“By whom? What kind of stupid aphorisms are you stuffing me with? Don’t judge, don’t judge!” Krasnov mimicked Hunt, speaking faster and faster and less clearly. “You’ve got some kind of problem with this. Of course I judge; everyone judges. Everyone, all the time. Maybe you want to convince me that you don’t feel aversion to me? I’ll believe in the communion of saints first! Vassone is sitting on your head, flashing her tits, showing off her computer face, Athena incarnate, the angel of knowledge, and what am I, an old, shrunken demon, a malicious brute, indecently unaesthetic, and on top of that in exile —what can I do? Who can I convince? Who...”

God and truth, Krasnov was right here. What good is it, impression was stronger than reason, after all Hunt was raised in a society already stratified phenotypically, the beauty of the body here informed about the level of intelligence and education. Subconsciously he divided every word heard from the mouth of a savage by two, he could do nothing about it, just like he could do nothing about a taste for liqueurs or herpetophobia. Form imposed context.

“I am surprised” Krasnov pontificated “how deeply rooted this Enlightened idea is in you that progress is a rectilinear process, having a certain constant value, relatively constant acceleration, and in addition in the general outline deterministic, where one discovery results from another and provokes another. Such is your vision of scientists and science: that there is great darkness and there is a circle of light, and the diameter of this circle is growing. On the

circumference the workers of brightness, the ants of truth, we, scientists. Shit. Excluding the unverifiable, useless pseudo-discoveries of the so-called humanities—all progress is a direct derivative of current economic trends. It's obvious! A blind man could see it! Here there are always some surprises, disgusted faces... Money and people go where there is a possibility of profit. Profit depends on economic conditions: not GUTs, but the chemistry of aphrodisiacs. Progress is permanently linked to the chaos of the free market and is its direct reflection. So too is progress chaotic, in the sense of the graphics of Mandelbrot sets. If you looked closely, you wouldn't see a circle, only a split fractal, and I, I, I have always been and will be at the end of this thinnest, longest branch, the one extending farthest into the darkness..."

"Okay, okay, don't be so angry, I'm sorry, I'll read everything carefully. Promise. Well? Is it okay now?"

Krasnov closed one eye, raised the index finger of his right hand.

"Here's a scathing meme: 'You know what your problem is? Well, Hunt, do you know what your problem is?'"

"'No, but I'm sure you'll tell me soon.' And: '"Do you want to talk about it?'"

"Heh heh, exactly. You don't believe in hatred."

"What?"

"That hatred. But such *Nastoyashcheye*, fiery, unconditional, insatiable. Because resentment, jealousy, anger, complaints—yes. But hatred? You can't hate. When someone hates you—you don't know how to deal with it either. You can't live with someone else's hatred—You instinctively give in, you admit the truth of his feelings, you forcibly compromise, you desperately seek ways of reconciliation, although he doesn't want compromise or reconciliation. But you are unable to understand this. Crippled. You have to be able to hate and live as the hated one."

"You can do it without a doubt."

"If only you knew!" Krasnow glared at Hunt and waved his hand. "You wouldn't understand, you have such a concrete-association: hatred is the greatest sin. Destroy it even, kill it—as long as it is without hatred, it somehow elegant,

in a cloak of cynical rationalizations. But since there is nothing worthy of your hatred, nor the acceptance of others —who are you really? How do you define yourselves? How do you perceive yourselves? Some vague clouds, great clouds of masking smoke. What is it masking? Nothing; itself. Hatred is a positive force, it gives you a sense of direction, creates personality vectors, it...”

He left the boss of the Hacienda in his room, drinking himself to the rhythm of this ode to hatred *á la* Gekko, and went down to minus seven, where, in several rooms and in the vast *foyer*, the actual conference was taking place. To remain in accordance with the dictionary to the end —these were more scientific workshops, a series of panels, paid brainstorming sessions, than a simple presentation of achievements to date. Here, guidelines for the Team’s new strategies were to be created, and for defining them Nicholas paid high fees from the Program’s funds to all participants, or at least —for making an effective attempt to define them. Most of them were perfectly aware of this. They smiled at him knowingly —he bowed slightly. Walking around the *foyer*, from group to group, they exchanged business cards and ironic comments, he caught them unintentionally from the monotonous hum of hushed voices (“*Silentium universi* The universe is silent, because such a memotrend dominates thought!”). In the corners, in the niches, on darkly upholstered armchairs, social companies sat down. In clouds of herbal smoke, over tables filled with cups of coffee, they gossiped about the absent, exchanged social jokes. Between the hundredth mockery and the thousandth curse, a mood will be born and be established here, which will then determine the content and final meaning of the post-conference reports. The overt dependence on money —that is, on business and budget stewards like Hunt —only highlights the rules of the sociobiological struggle for existence: they see that psychometrics has support and will not attack a new predator unwisely.

Hunt passed the door of the first group’s room, where Schatz was pontificating about sects, the resonance of form, and the star of two signs (even Ronald’s fevered voice reached the corridor), and looked into the second group. He had found himself in the middle of a cosmological dispute.

On the wall LED, the two-dimensional universe was shrinking to a singularity, then exploding, in an inflationary slippage, swelling to the ceiling and the adjacent walls. “The assumption made by Dr. Vassone about the dependence of monads and thought on existence,” said a tall pheno-indian woman in a gray mono suit from N’Hui, “is devoid of scientific foundation. No evidence

has been presented for the constant dependence of psychomeme structures on the products of material nervous systems. Leaving aside the consequences of the psychophysical problem,” (here the room thundered with laughter) ”the life of such beings would be too fragile, constantly threatened by the immediate destabilization of homeostasis, and it would certainly make any evolution very difficult. The hypothesis of the longevity of mental creations, regardless of local psychomeme radiations, seems more rational, especially since we do not know what ‘local’ means in the context of thought. If so, if monads do not need the continuous existence of material organisms, their constant ‘feeding,’ they are not only a modulation of the stream of mental secretions —then their existence also becomes possible in non-psychozoic intervals. For example, at the dawn of the universe. In the grave silence of its thermal death. If we therefore lean toward the model of the pulsating universe...” most of those present clearly did, Hunt was not familiar with cosmology terms, he had no idea which theories are currently in vogue here ”... we see that the separation of subsequent universes is not complete, there is a sphere that is not subject to the laws of physics. Something is inherited.”

A voice from the audience:

“Does Dr. Peer therefore believe that neuromonads come from the previous cycle of the universe?”

(Dr. Peer is the pheno-indian, Hunt concluded.)

Peer shrugged. She doesn’t know. But there is a possibility of continuity. Therefore, we need to look very carefully at the mechanism of interaction between mind and matter, this is a pebble for the garden of neurophysiologists and those who laughed so hard here, because if the phenomenon really occurs at the level of quantum gravity...

“So what?”

“It is in the structure of thought at that time that we can find the pattern that deformed the form of the universe in the first fractions of a second and established the parameters.”

“Consciously? Unconsciously?” Another shrug.

“Perhaps the neuromonads simply wanted to be sure that in the new cosmos

they would not lack food.”

From the audience:

“Fairy tales! Fairy tales! A new anthropic equation!”

From the audience:

“Who established the parameters of the first universe, the one from whose psychomeme emissions thought was constituted?”

From the audience:

“At least it finally puts the fucked-up version of Wheeler to rest, because there was an outside observer after all.”

“What version of Wheeler is this?” Hunt asked quietly of the pheno-nord in an EDC uniform leaning against the door frame. The ID read: MAJOR T. FUZZ.

”A variation on the anthropic principle,” the major explained, without even turning his head, clearly thinking about something else. “Wheeler’s participatory universe. If we also consider the subsequent mutations on the evolutionary path to the form of a psychozoic endowed with consciousness to be quantum events, it is obvious that until the moment of the emergence of that consciousness, they, those speciation variants, existed as superpositions of probable states.” Hunt’s eyes widened at such a dictum, but Major Fuzz continued. “Reduction occurs at the moment of observation. Human existence is validated by the retroactive selection of the appropriate mutation path, and that is, one that would allow for the emergence of consciousness and that reduction. A causal paradox. This takes away the meaning of the question of coincidences, because *Homo sapiens* here becomes the primary cause, although later in the stream of time. Well, but thought falsifies that.” Hunt did not understand any of it.

The major must have seen it in his eyes. After glancing once more at Dr. Peer (she was arguing with some uniformed officer in the first row), he sighed and pulled Nicholas into the *foyer*. They stopped just outside the door. Fuzz looked around and yanked a napkin off the coffee set on a nearby table.

”Quantum physics, the basics,” he muttered, drawing a graph on the napkin with a pen he had pulled out who knew when or where. The graph consisted

of two perpendicular lines and a bell curve. "Vertical, probability, from zero to one. On the horizontal axis, individual states of the system. Have you heard of Schrodinger's cat?"

"I'm not that dumb."

"Okay. Then you know that until the moment of observation, the system is not in one specific state, but in a superposition of all probable states. The cat is alive and the cat is dead. A coin lands heads up and a coin lands tails up, fifty-fifty." But let's start complicating the examples a bit, let's take a few cubed dice. The sum of the numbers rolled is described by such a wave function, the Gaussian curve is natural for stochastic distributions. The one on the probability axis is somewhere here, the extremum of the function here. The dice lie under the cup, we can't see it. We lift the cup, an observation occurs, the function collapses, reduces to one state, the probability of which jumps to one. Let's say, this one." The major quickly crossed out a bar about two thirds of the width of the bell, a few times higher than it. "Do you see? All other states fall to zero, flatten out on the axis, and this one, observed..."

"I understand, I understand."

"Theoretically, a wave function can describe a system of any complexity, consisting of an arbitrarily large number of quantum objects. The Earth. The galaxy. The universe. Until observed, it looks exactly like this. An observer is needed to reduce the function."

Wheeler took it in that direction. Because let's imagine: the Big Bang, expansion, galaxy formation —there is still no one who has made observations, no state of the cosmos has been decided, no specific distribution of matter, no proportions of particles, maybe no specific physical constants either. You have the entire set of possible parameter packages of the universe on the curve here; move a bit on the axis to the left or right and you get a different universe. The question is: to which universe will the function ultimately collapse?

"Well, it did collapse somehow!" Hunt laughed uncertainly.

"Yes, but why not to a state in which the existence of man would be impossible? This is the question underlying the Anthropic Principle. Surprise at the improbability of our existence. Wheeler's answer is as follows: we exist because we can observe. We have the power to collapse wave functions. If it weren't for

us, the universe would not have actualized itself at all. Actualization requires an observer, so the choices have been narrowed to states that produce these observers: psycho-zoics, intelligent and self-aware beings.”

Nicholas smoothed his mustache.

”Mhmmm, I feel there’s a catch here somewhere. Major... how can you observe a system from inside it?”

The Major smiled at Hunt, folded his napkin, put away the pen.

”When we talk about the universe,” he said, ”a system that by definition encompasses everything, there’s no such thing as ’observation from the outside.’”

”So how can we be sure that the collapse has even occurred?”

The Major spread his arms —Nicholas wasn’t sure of the intention of the gesture: was Fuzz showing his helplessness or was he pointing in response to the world around him.

Hunt went to the next room. Here, according to the schedule previously checked by phone, Per Mueller was soon to appear. The group had set aside today for discussing potentially useful side theories, and the Hacienda people were just getting ready. Dr. Jugrin was dispelling someone’s doubts about the actual effectiveness of the Efes. On the wall, white mice were eating synthetic food from feeders.

”Efes (FS —futuroscope) in the current version,” Jugrin maintained “reaches nominal for three hundred and twelve seconds. The power is determined in a way analogous to Estep tests, but instead of identical mazes, we have three evenly spaced feeders coupled with pseudorandom number generators. At the time t_{rnd} the machine decides in which corner the food will appear. The camera records all the mouse movements. The average advances with which the starving animals lurk in front of the correct feeder determine the power of the version. In subsequent trials, the number of feeders is increased, and they are moved away from each other. The pre-reaction time ($t_{rnd} - t_n$) does not vary for individual experiments by more than a few seconds: the mice are genetically standardized. However, after moving on to tests on genetically non-identical material, the difference in effective ranges exceeds five hundred percent! The same version of Efes, which in the first attempts gives a five-minute horizon, allows some

Efes to make predictions of almost half an hour. This suggests the existence of genetically determined features or sets of features that are particularly conducive to the futuroscope. So far we have not been able to isolate them. This property of the organism, this modifying factor, has been called Jugrinine after my name” the doctor confessed with an uncertain smile. Whistles and giggles. “The highest Jugrinine recorded so far in *Homo sapiens* is 4.78. No zero Jugrinine has been recorded.”

“As for the usefulness of Efes in the Economic Wars,” the doctor continued “theoretically it can give us a huge advantage, but in practice certain difficulties appear. While initially —centuries ago —playing on the stock exchange referred to certain economic indicators from the real world, in the era of the Wars the only real point of reference is the stock exchange itself. But not for the Efeses —for the Efeses, the basis is already that the meta-stock exchange, an unanalysable secretion of the blurred logics of private and state brokerage machines. There are no rational premises for the choices made here by the Efeses: only the readings of the future are decisive. For reasons unknown so far, it is impossible to play effectively, simultaneously, on more than one security every time: some realisation of profits fails, sometimes all of them. This practically makes an object fight on the stock exchange impossible, because in the Economic Wars it is impossible to carry out an effective attack based on a single issue.”

Then Per-Mueller entered the rostrum. He was a broad-shouldered pheno-semite with dark eyes and an eagle gaze, a juridical tattoo wrapped around his neck.

In the meantime, Hunt listened to his bio over the phone —which turned out to be Per-Mueller, a cognitive scientist brought to Hacienda by Krasnov from the Bridge project. Now he was talking about that too: implants. “As you know” he began after clearing his throat “the implant models currently available on the market are based on the Hamaba 6 model, approved under the first act on neuroimplantation, based on that damn convention, which, I remind you, we ratified together with the whole package. True, everyone ratified it. In the meantime, we have gone much further at the Bridge, but these technologies remain proprietary: the military, Shadows, medical physics, and so on. At least for now, Hamaba 6 is limited to stimulating the centers of the mind, it is very primitive in terms of connections, it requires a series of microtrepanations, hence the relative cost of installation, despite the growing popularity of internal orthovirtualizations. The Toulouse 10 model, which forms the basis of the current

work, is based on the Tokyo nanoparasite model. An intra-endocrine injection is sufficient. That is, you see, two centimeters of suspension intravenously. The nanomats gradually settle into the brain and establish their own structure. Apart from anything else, it is extremely cheap. The process takes about twelve hours. Practically the entire cortex is covered. The communication module crystallizes here, beneath the cerebellum. Toulouse 10 bypasses all activity of the central and autonomic nervous systems. Each connection is potentially interactive. In the Gladiator version, designed for the military, the amplification of inductive functions allows...”

He went on and on, describing the advantages of the latest versions of the implant and grumbling about the legal restrictions, until Hunt began to despair about ever hearing anything about Fungus. Finally, the word was spoken.

“...as Fungus, and I have no idea why. The concept is based on the work of Dr. Vassone mentioned here, and on the conclusions of the Team’s experience in tracking down monochromatic stationary monads.” (Montana, Hunt thought; but no, it’s too late.) “Maximum separation is required, primary purity of thought, hence the idea of using the abandoned bases on Mar Imbrium. We inject preprogrammed Toulouse 10. The more carriers, the better. We settle them in this base, load them into cocoons, soak them in retaxilose or polbraxin, in any case to avoid interference with their dreams, and start the program. The assumption: Toulouse 10 stimulates any sensory sensations we choose. With any intensity, for any length of time, any modulation. Ladies and gentlemen, I’m not talking about finding, capturing and training monads. I’m talking about creating our own. Of course, achieving the proficiency that would allow us to construct monads from scratch with the features we have chosen requires long and laborious research by trial and error, I am aware of that. But here everything depends on us, there are no limits to the amount of raw material...”

Hunt listened to the discussion —although time was pressing, there were less than two hours left until the meeting with Senator Tito, scheduled for the morning —and then left. Someone spoke to him, blocked his way in the *foyer* —Hunt just waved his hand and, with pursed lips, passed the man. A certain conjecture was stabbing in his head, he could feel it almost physically, that special tension of thoughts, the knotting of associations —and fearing a sudden de-concentration and distraction, he ruthlessly removed any reasons for potential distractions from his sight and hearing. He turned off his phone. He looked away and lowered his gaze. He even brutally pushed someone away. He

almost ran to the elevators. Fungus, Montana, Kleist, security, does he know something, supposedly should know, Fungus, Fungus, full-inductive Toulouse 10, it was on the tip of his tongue, at the tip of his mind.

In the elevator, he bumped into Schatz. Ronald was clearly half-blind, because he reacted with a delay and looked at Hunt, tilting his head, as if some opaque veil hung in the air between him and Nicholas.

Schatz had just finished another presentation of his discovery and still couldn't tear himself away from the subject.

"Systematically," he began to persuade Hunt on the spot, "we have to approach this systematically."

"The effects will be compounded, you saw the curve, we have to monitor it, just like we monitor the Economics and the Monads. True, it won't play out in days and weeks, but the cumulative impact will be much deeper. What right do we have to assume that Nefele is some kind of exception here?" Schatz was getting excited in front of Hunt, who was half-aware of the meaning of his words. "It is simply that due to the relative proximity of Sheratan, it is easy to isolate the psychomeme emission of its ecosphere and find a correlation, but it would be unwise to assume that radiation from more distant psychozoic cultures does not reach us, only more attenuated..."

They had already left the elevator and entered the main hall of the Bunker, but Schatz was not leaving Hunt's side for a moment.

"What do you want exactly?" Nicholas was irritated, stopping at the gates. "A grant?"

"I want...!" Schatz snorted. "Doesn't anyone else care? We need to know exactly what..."

"Fine, fine, you'll get the funds, goodbye."

Whether Schatz was offended or pleased — Hunt didn't even notice. He was desperately trying to return to the once-broken chain of associations — without success. You can't enter the same river twice, unless it's dry, and now he was trampling the barren bed of the Nile of intuition, on the banks of which were heaps of dead associations. Driving across town to the senator's skyhouse, he salvaged what he could of the surviving fragments of the image he had seen in

a flash of insight during Per-Mueller's lecture. The image was enormous, and Hunt had only small, colorful fragments left, collections of pixels suggesting larger structures. He mumbled hurriedly into the signet ring, recording lopsided verbal approximations. Later, he would deduce from them what he had really meant.

He drove up to the World Trade Center. At the skyhouse, he was greeted personally by Gaspar Tito, in a knit sweater and worn cotton trousers. Nicholas looked around for Imelda, but apart from the two of them, there seemed to be no one there; there was a clinical silence, no sign of servants, the entire level was empty. He returned his gaze to the senator. Tito smiled knowingly. So that was what this conversation would be like.

If it weren't for NEti, Gaspar would probably have taken Nicholas's arm—and he was just showing the way. They went to the senator's office. Hunt crossed this threshold for the first time.

Gaspar carefully closed the door.

"This is a safe room," he said, pushing an armchair over to Hunt. "I've never even installed an insurance network here. Telephone transmissions are shielded."

"I see, this is where you negotiate the amount of bribes."

Tito laughed politely. He offered a drink, a cigar, asked about health, stocks, the Nets, just not about work. Before he fell with a loud sigh into his seat, a throne gleaming with black leather, he reduced the intensity of the gas wall lamps by half. This was how fashion vectors were arranged: the more potentially dangerous and forbidden something was, the fewer people could afford it. The gas lamps gave off a pleasant, soft light, pulsating in the semidarkness in a hypnotizing rhythm. Gaspar himself—his face, his hands—was mostly hidden in shadow. The arrangement of the furniture was not accidental. Should I be offended?—Nicholas thought.

"So you got lucky," Tito said. "In times of epidemics, the doctors hold the real power."

"The return of the king," Hunt sneered at himself in advance.

"In times of war, soldiers, and now who will take over?"

“Interesting question, Nicholas muttered, wondering how long they would practice this aikido. A similar style of conversation was in his blood, he had to force himself to overcome the routine of reflexive evasions and allusions, but it was an incredibly time-consuming way of talking, and Hunt was now drawn to the capital, to Oiol, Bronstein, to the EDC superiors. What he already knew, plus a few vague suggestions, plus blackmail, plus the mood of Washington... The possibilities were endless. He also wondered about Stimmel, whom he had here, on the spot, but Stimmel was only an advisory voice, his word had no binding force, he was, like Nicholas himself, on the sidelines, only echoes reached him. Part of Hunt’s consciousness was still in the lecture hall of the Bunker, listening to the eagle-nosed Per-Mueller, balancing on the edge of an ecstasy of illumination. The need to focus on his brother-in-law’s words irritated him. To end this as soon as possible. But habit, but habits —which, as Aristotle teaches, shape a person’s true nature —told him something else: wait, let the opponent get involved, let him strike first, the momentum of his own words will push him against the wall.

“In times of epidemics,” Tito continued “the greatest power is held by those who segregate people; Those who are worth saving and those who are at the mercy of the plague. Those who distribute the meager supplies of medicines.”

“I have no medicines.”

“Think about it. There is, however, a slight difference between us: you are not protected by a statutory length of term. My dependency is temporary, yours —continuous.”

He is proposing a transaction, Hunt mused. Protection in exchange —in exchange for what? Or maybe he is threatening?

The second person to assume that I know something I know nothing about, he thought, recalling the bitter look of General Kleist, the EDC.

“You’ll give me your word,” he said suddenly.

“What...?” Tito leaned forward, emerging from the safe shadow of the high back of the armchair.

“You’ll promise me,” Hunt said, laughing inwardly at the repetition of the surreal situation. “You’ll promise me your support when the reckoning comes.”

The senator stared at Nicholas for a long moment in absolute stillness, his physiognomy expressing nothing, Tito was a pheno-black, dark skinned, his deep-set eyes searching Hunt's face for the slightest sign that Nicholas was joking. Not finding it, Gaspar slowly nodded.

"Of course. How else. I promise."

With the utmost effort of will, Hunt held back a boorish laugh from bursting from the depths of his diaphragm.

"To start with, tell me about Fungus," he ordered in a carefully modulated voice.

"Fungus? What Fungus?"

"Oh?" Hunt theatrically played his astonishment. "Didn't you hear about these new implants? Toulouse 10. Protection by induction of blocking impulses."

Tito jumped to his feet, walked around the desk, punching his open left hand as he did so and mumbling something to himself, looking at Nicholas every now and then. Hunt saw the smile disappearing from the senator's lips, then returning —there was relief in this virtual smile, there was satisfaction, contentment, but also fear and uncertainty.

"So after all," Tito panted, leaning his knuckles on the edge of the mahogany tabletop "so after all."

Nicholas adjusted the cuffs of his monoshirt with pantomimic pedantry. At one time —back in Real Life —he unleashed several not insignificant scandals in this way, creating huge snowmen of gossip from the confluence of other people's words, snowballs of hearsay facts, which quickly took on a living body of paper and money. The beginning of a trend never heralds the horror and power of the avalanche with which it ends.

The first rule is as follows: any lie that begins with a "yes" is ten times more believable than one that begins with a negative.

The second rule is this: a person believes.

"December?" Tito asked. He was breathing very deeply, his powerful chest moving under his sweater like a boxer's after a gong.

“Slowly, slow down.”

Tito sat down at his desk, lowering his gaze. With irregular movements of his large hands, he moved the inkwell, the hourglass, the knife, the loosely bound papers back and forth across the desk.

“Yeah. If you can guarantee me... us..... You can?”

“Maybe.”

“Nicholas, for God’s sake!”

“I wonder,” Hunt muttered “how this got to you.”

In his mind, he was betting on Vassone. After all, she had some connections to the senator, the nature of which Hunt had not yet managed to find out anything specific. Somehow he intuitively assumed that Marina was hiding something from him, that she was subtly misleading him and lying to him —from the beginning. Maybe it was simply her mannerism, the dominant form of behavior; or maybe she was manipulating. Something could have leaked out... in moments of relaxation, sudden endorphin hits... ecstasy.

“On Capitol Hill,” Tito sighed. “Assistant Howell, who sits on the supervisory board, got drunk at one of the closed sponsor dinners, I was sitting next to him, he started babbling about salads, I had, I don’t know, a premonition, Howell’s look, God’s grace, I led him to the bathroom. What it turned out: he’s sleeping with one of Vermundter’s guys and that lover advised him... Why should he pay for today’s junk —because the assistant was planning to get an implant. So the Vermundter guy tells him: wait, you’ll have to protect yourself anyway, if they screw things up in New York. I asked about Vermundter, and I see it’s a siding of Bridge. Well, nothing. You hear all sorts of things. But these last two weeks... People are already so nervous, there are strange rumors. Some kind of reshuffle... You understand: someone else bows first, another smile, he changes his mind here, there keeps quiet. For example, these McManamara maneuvers, the dance with your budget. Changes in trends that elevate. Signals of this type. You don’t have to be a genius to put two and two together. A person doesn’t know the deadlines, through official channels it will be who knows how long. A few morons are trying to fight their way through the bureaucracy, threatening to reveal. Reveal what? Idiots. I’ve spoken to Modl and Wiggin —they deny it. It’s very possible that they really don’t know. Who was I supposed to

contact? You're the center of the whole network."

Modl is the President's National Security Advisor, Wiggin —the CIA's Deputy Director for Operational Intelligence.

"December?" Hunt asked, smoothing his trouser leg.

"December, December," Tito mumbled. "I don't know anything specific, really. It's a word. It's floating around the corridors. Not in the sense of a date. Someone from Bronstein's office blurted out something in the context of this new implant and the Mushroom: 'As long as it's before December.' Absurd, because the whole Monadic War will boil away much earlier. So something else. You know how these buzzwords roll. No correlation with the content. It's not even clear how or who to ask, too vague. You get the idea. But the word circulates, the fear grows."

The senator still didn't look at Hunt (he looked at his hands, his hands were constantly moving, inkwell, hourglass, pen, inkwell), and Nicholas was impressed by his sincerity. His respect for his brother-in-law was decreasing by the minute. So sincere —how much his position must have been weakened, how little power he had left, how desperate he was to open up to me so sleazily. Ugh.

"I'm flying to Washington now," Nicholas said, looking up at Gaspar leaning over his desk. "I have to talk to Bronstein. The conference will be over on Monday, NYSE, NASDAQ and WSFM will be verified on Monday, as well as Amex; we'll know where we stand."

"Have you already...?" Tito finished with a movement of his eyes: toward Hunt's forehead and the top of his head.

"Well, you can't check that."

"Yes. Indeed."

"Where's Imelda?"

"I talked her into a vacation in the Cayman Islands."

You're afraid it would affect her too. You're cleaning the area around the potential target. "Would it?"

"Probably not."

“I waited, waited, because I had the illusion that maybe you would try to... protect her.”

What can be said, a lie is a lie, you can't go beyond the image you once created, form obliges. There are lies for a day, there are lies for an entire career. The ergonomics of the soul is a great branch of the technology of success. Hunt stood up, shrugged.

In the future, it's better not to count too much on the strength of my feelings for my sister.

He didn't even smile, didn't blink: he was already starting to sincerely believe in the words he said out loud.

Year after year
Me in the monkey mask —
A real monkey.

Death in the Capitol

SO Hunt flew to Washington. He didn't like going back there. Even on the plane, that unpleasant, irritating feeling had awakened in him—a kind of itch, a phantom pain from an amputated career. But why not take advantage of such an opportunity? He had to meet with Bronstein. Bronstein, who, on DARPA's authority, personally supervised both the Team and the Hacienda, Bronstein, whom even Tito had mentioned. Only he could be asked directly without risking the discovery of a bluff. Face to face, when no foreign form applies, but under NETi. Bronstein would have to make some offer. Maybe after consulting with the Kolobba council. But he would give something, propose something. Back to RL. Yes. Maybe. Somehow. Hunt was already imagining intoxicating scenarios.

Bronstein worked directly for the managers of the current winning lobby—officially he was a partner in one of the specialized Washington law firms—and could be reached only through Radick. At least that was what Oiol, with whom Hunt had talked for almost the entire short flight to the capital, had said. Nicholas even wondered whether it would not be wiser to approach Radick directly. But he decided against it. Radick probably didn't know anything anyway: he held too high a position.

Paul Radick was the current president's direct controller. Traditionally, he held the position of White House chief of staff. The more radical journalists wrote that it looked as if the president himself was actually one of that staff. Of course, that was a big exaggeration: in everyday life, it didn't look like that at all. However, when it came to making some important decisions, to economic crises... Radick was there. He couldn't blackmail the commander-in-chief of the

armed forces (not openly, anyway) —but he could remind him.

It is well known that it is hard to find a more ungrateful beast in this world than a politician after winning an election. For a term or two, such loose alliances of lobbies with non-contradictory priorities were formed, capable of exerting overwhelming pressure together. In practice, however, semi-public supervisors-advisors, delegated specifically for this purpose by the lobbyist committee, were always necessary. They were not reassurances. In those days, as Hunt liked to say, there were no reassurances any more. They were simply another element in a process that could not be grasped in any words.

Lobbies of all kinds—oilers, insurers, filmmakers, car manufacturers, farmers, intellectuals, retirees—have existed and operated since time immemorial, but they have been a kind of intra- and extra-party annexes, moderators of politics with more or less momentary leverage. Gradually, this field became increasingly professional, and in the last quarter of the twentieth century it became the domain of the same professional managers as election campaigns before it. In the aughts, this caste of Washington neo-yuppies, earning megadollars for obtaining specific political effects for generous clients, were ossified by quiet precedents into official structures, precisely defined by law and custom. Hunt, Bronstein, Oioli, all of them came from there.

But Bronstein did not have to be in Washington at all. Hunt had his phone number encrypted, of course, but the savage had clearly given the Team a low-priority number, because Nicholas kept bouncing off the furiously polite secretarial program. He had never called Bronstein before—the last thing he wanted was to attract extra attention from his superiors—but he doubted whether he really did keep up the constant phone conferences very often. So he simply sent word of his arrival, followed by an enigmatical: “I know all about it. They’ve got it ready. I won’t let this go.” Let it simmer in its own juice, and what! It’ll soften him up during that time and get him to be more nervous at the bargaining table.

In Real Life, Hunt was accompanied on all his business trips by a few people. Technical issues of this kind never occupied his attention either; he always had his meetings arranged in advance, and a live secretary filtered his phone calls, asked questions, and was answered. How painful are the awakenings of gods in human skin.

During the flight, he ordered a car and after leaving the airport concourse,

he got into the waiting dark texijo. From the folded-up LEDpad, he copied a bank of hundred-year-old addresses into the car's computer and asked: "Maus."

The matter was somewhat complicated by the time of day: dusk had already fallen over Washington, the city lights were blurred behind the texijo's glazed windows. Now is the time of semi-official receptions and completely unofficial consultations, during which real work is brewing, then simulated in front of the cameras. Bronstein can be anywhere and nowhere.

The Maus was a new office complex built in the style of a ragtag Victorian mansion multiplied by ten stories. The impression was all the greater because the building was surrounded on all sides by a two-story, open parking lot. Hunt drove up from the north, where the offices of Private Ears Associated, the most popular sneaker agency specializing in spying on politics and business, was located. He parked in a red parking space, which meant he requested anonymous service.

The PEA employee, a pheno-californian, knocked on the window after ten minutes. Hunt ordered the car to open the back door. Ucho got in, Nicholas turned around in his seat, they exchanged a quick handshake, with Ucho closing his hand on Hunt's balled fist, reading the subcutaneous cashchip through a recorder implanted under the thumb muscle. The guy must have been half-blind, at least the video, his eyeballs were moving from side to side in irregular bursts.

They sat in silence for a moment as the PEA man checked the car's active links. Then he introduced himself.

"Jason. What would you like to know?"

"Bronstein, Marvsky, Libezet and Delany. Current contacts."

"Okay."

He had completely blinded himself. Nicholas tapped his fingers on the upholstery of the chair. The distant lights and shadows of the Capitol evoked unpleasant associations. Pain, humiliation; those wounds burned as if sprinkled with salt whenever he remembered. A surge of deeper associations would suffice. But fine, so be it, let them burn—he would return, now he had a suitable card, tonight he would prevail. Bronstein. Fungus. December? He considered this, running the tip of his tongue over the roof of his mouth. December—better not

to bring up the subject, no one knows what it is, it could be anything, wiser not to ask at all, a slight nuance of context could betray ignorance, too great a risk. Better let Anselm sniff around some more.

"Bronstein, Peter Frederick, flew from Milan Lufthansa at seven twenty in the morning, first class, on the house," Jason (also a Californian name) suddenly spoke up. "There are no bookings for today or tomorrow, neither by name nor by money. But that doesn't mean anything, he has used corporate and government machines before. There was a confirmation of participation in the introductory party of one of the management companies, but he canceled. Similarly —dinner at the EU embassy. The pattern of telephone calls on public nodes is too chaotic, does not suggest any specific location. Last manual transaction: at the airport in the morning, filtration ointment. It is not known where he ate. No distinguished place of work. He has an implant. No permanent sexual partner. Trevelyanist. He studied computer science, management, and of course law. From the size of known deposits and withdrawals, we can deduce the amount of the account, but most of it went into the papers. Announced income: four point four mega."

Oh! This indicated that Bronstein is considered a top-class specialist, headhunters had to take him down for the lobbyists of the current president with no small bang, traces should remain. But that's for later. In the meantime: the address.

"Poorly," he commented aloud.

"Poorly," Jason admitted. "It's well covered, a lot of it goes through the black crystals."

(The black crystals meant government machines.)

"Probability distribution?"

"Seventy-two that he was intercepted by private transport and taken out of the District this morning."

"Next."

"Fourteen that he's at home."

"Address."

"The Watergate."

Hunt smiled under his mustache.

"Okay, copy the rest," he handed Jason an LEDpad. While copying the data and authorizing the transfer of the fee, the ear shared a personal reflection with Nicholas.

"You know, we're gradually getting more and more orders for people like him, us and the information brokers; also from the media. They're starting to surface. The unofficial becomes official. I'm sure not everyone likes it, but I think it's another natural turn of history. There are cycles; every few years it has to be moved to reduce the load, so something will have to change here soon..."

"Yeah, that'll change for sure."

Jason got out, the texijo started moving. Hunt stared thoughtfully at the unprofiled CNN service on the side window. Out of all this cursory research, the only thing that interested him the most was the information about Peter Bronstein's roots. A Trevelyanist! So he is indeed unsculpted, he actually comes from the "first three quarters." He had to sell out to enter the second layer, then the third, and even higher. (The popular rule of three quarters described the social proportions of economic standards using a simple sequence, it was arranged roughly as follows: 75%, 19%, 5%, 1%; with the top one percent receiving more than three quarters —again —of the total sum of income.)

The Trevelyan method that Bronstein had resorted to —its name came from the surname of a certain doctor from one of the Sherlock Holmes stories —was very risky due to the obligatory capitalization of debt, and NAFTA regulations did not allow it anyway, Trevelyanists offered themselves on Asian markets. After a few lean years, some of them lost their nerves and reached for Relief Pills. Russian roulette. Because how can you secure your investment out there? Only on the rights of TP and DNAM and on transplant material —what more does a person have? Most Trevelyanists could not be bought out in full by the end of the usual twenty years.

So Bronstein was simply a pathologically ambitious upstart, capable of risking his own life in the name of dreams. Now Nicholas could despise him, but now he had to fear him too.

He drove up to the Watergate. The information that the ginger savage lived right there amused Hunt, because he still kept an apartment in the historic complex —he couldn't bring himself to give up renting it, it would be the last nail in the coffin, a kind of symbolic self-cremation.

He sent the texijo away and entered the lobby. The doorman remembered him, he bowed. The elevator also recognized Hunt, he had no problem getting to Bronstein's floor. Only in front of his door —only then did something touch him. He found him at home; too quick of a success, too much happiness. The door was not closed, an equilateral triangle of light shot out from the crack onto the red carpet of the corridor.

Nicholas immediately took a few steps back. Film associations hit him in a wave now, he choked with terror. There was murder, there were hired killers in monosuits, big guns over Bronstein's corpse; they would come out soon, they would see me, blood.

No, let's not be ridiculous, let's not think in patterns, this is not a movie, what kind of killers... He almost smiled.

But somehow he did not move forward. The door really was not closed. From behind it —only thick silence and pale light. It was not that Bronstein had forgotten to close it —quite the opposite: it closed by itself. They must have a special order to remain unlocked, and even then, they would consult the building's security system programs. After all, where if anywhere —but here they had a reason to beware of burglars.

So what? Machine failure?

He stood motionless. His legs were smarter, they were trying to turn and run toward the elevators. But what should he do? The corridor is covered by the NEti network, the image has already been saved in the notarial crystals, any investigation will reach Hunt anyway. But he doesn't necessarily have to be connected to Bronstein, Nicholas lives here, he can simply go further down the corridor and stand in front of one of the next doors, where he has the right to expect to find acquaintances (Isn't this the floor where the Scriffs from "The Post" live?), everyone will understand the passing interest in the half-open apartment —or at least that's how his lawyers can explain it.

But what if there's no scandal? That's much more likely. What then? Should

he leave like that, without trying to meet Bronstein at all, scared by the streak of light, is he really such a coward, such a coward? The opportunity may never come again. The information he would throw in Bronstein's face may have the power to resurrect the dead —if he plays it wisely, if he dances well with this particular man...

Back and forth, back and forth, blood in his heart and fear in his mind. He would stand there forever, if not for someone's footsteps around the bend. Then, reacting like at a signal programmed under deep hypnosis, he quickly ran to the door, opened it all the way, entered and closed it behind him.

Bronstein hung helplessly in the middle of the living room, hung on a leather strap attached to a crystal chandelier, now very askew. Eyes bulging. Blue lips. Purple furrows on his neck (he had torn his flesh with his fingernails).

Hunt raised his hand with effort and squeezed the head of the juridical pin between his fingers.

Immediately, a priority call signal squealed in his ear.

"A&S Justice Incorporated," a woman's voice (almost certainly a secretarial Turing woman) rustled. "The team has already left. Can you speak?"

"Yes."

"Please confirm location."

Hunt forgot the apartment number. He gave Bronstein's name.

"Threat level?" the program asked.

"Found his body."

"Murder?"

"I don't know. Hanging on the belt."

"Who else has been notified?"

"Nobody. I think."

"You're alone there."

"Yes."

"Please remain where you are, don't touch anything..."

"...touch, yes, I know."

"...and don't try to wipe it off if you have. Physiological sensations?"

"None."

"Fine. Please step out into the hallway."

"I wasn't supposed to move."

"We've just checked the building's internal security system. Mr. Bronstein's apartment and hallway have been sealed off, the main program and diagnostics have been blocked off. Please step out."

He left.

"The door wasn't locked."

"Once sealed off, you can turn off all autonomous functions. Is the air conditioning working there?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

He waited. If one of the Scriffs was actually at home and just left... Jesus Christ. Clinical death, a media zombie. He waited.

"When will they finally be here?"

"They're coming down from the roof now."

They flew in by helicopter, he concluded.

He backed up a dozen or so meters toward the bend and peered around the corner at the elevators and the doors to the fire escapes. Of course, they wouldn't rely on the elevator, since they were messing with the security program. How long had it been? He glanced at his watch. The numbers meant nothing to him, too bad he hadn't looked at first. That damn light was still shining from inside Bronstein's apartment, this time Hunt himself hadn't closed the door, a real curse.

When he looked around the corner again, they were already running: two men and a woman, tall, pheno-soldiers, tattoos of the juridical corporation on their hairless skulls, black monofilament suits, weapons in their hands.

"To the wall!" shouted the left-handed one.

Hunt obediently flattened himself against the wainscoting.

The juridical private police recruited not as much former government cops as former soldiers, and most often from special units into their ranks; stormtroopers, anti-terrorists, Shadows —hence one could often find nanocyborgs among them, corporations emphasized this a lot in their advertising campaigns, myths were taking strong root. Now Nicholas wasn't even particularly surprised to see the inhuman sprint of these three, the pavement tore under their boots, they were immediately at Hunt's side, the left-hander fell to him, pressed him even harder against the wall, the other two ran past, they silently reached the door of Bronstein's apartment, the woman sprayed something inside, they waited two heartbeats, suddenly again: an explosion of movement —first the man kicked under the doorknob and jumped in, the woman after him, they disappeared from Hunt's sight. He couldn't see much at all from behind the shield of the jurda's massive body, only flat shadows on the pavement.

"Okay," the left-handed jurda finally muttered and let go of Nicholas.

"Clean?"

"Yes."

A pheno-asian woman in a gray suit made of natural fabrics, with a briefcase in her hand that was almost a symbol of her profession, was walking toward them from the stairs. A brooch with the A&S logo fastened her snow-white blouse high under the neck.

After brushing her asymmetrically cut hair from her forehead, she offered Hunt a narrow hand. Cashchip confirmed the identification. She bowed, took out a business card. The NEti rituals began. The jurda stood nearby, still with a gun in his hand, and stared blankly into space, probably severely blinded, probably pulled out on the leashes of the senses of his partners, who were inside Bronstein's apartment.

After exceptionally abbreviated formalities, Arthur Woskowitz indicated the

open door invitingly.

"We'd better go inside."

They entered, the lefty behind them.

Bronstein hangs, as he did. There was no trace of the other two Jurdas. They were probably still checking the next rooms, more and more thoroughly each time, down to the level of fingerprints and biological traces.

The attorney began the interrogation. They stood in front of the body, she didn't even put down her briefcase, everything was filled with an atmosphere of temporariness, haste. Hunt mechanically answered procedural questions. It was recorded, of course; Nicholas could have sworn that the implants of all four had been continuously working in A-V scanning mode since they landed on the Watergate roof. However, unless it served to protect their client's rights, the recordings would not be made available to the court —there had not even been a precedent for that yet. Woskowitz quickly read a series of questions from a board invisible to Hunt, Nicholas answered.

The jurda searched the interior. The right-hander and the woman hid their weapons. They walked through the living room several times. The woman stopped for a while under the chandelier. She walked around Bronstein's body, sniffing —anything, so as not to touch it.

Meanwhile, Woskowitz got to the reason Hunt had come to the deceased.

"I am bound by confidentiality rules," he said. "This is related to my job. I signed it, and I can't break it."

"You work for the government."

"Yes."

"Mr. Bronstein..."

"He did some work for the White House, he had the appropriate clearances."

"Is he on the Secret Service roster?"

"Yes."

"Shit." The lawyer expressed her personal involvement for the first time.
 "Twenty minutes. You should have reported to us by now."

"Should I stay?"

"No, in this situation, that would be inadvisable. Please return to New York as soon as possible, our branch will take over there. Any questions should be directed to us. We will try to ensure your anonymity, but something will probably leak to the media anyway. Advice: Full isolation. Change of codes and secretarial program, I recommend Lucius. Do not leave NEti. Minimize your stays in publicly accessible areas, in public places. Under no circumstances say a word, not even about the weather."

"Worst case scenario?"

"The murder theory will almost certainly come out, someone went to a lot of trouble here to allow him to hang himself peacefully. The guy could have simply taken Kevorkian. But no. He hung himself. How. It seems possible, but impractical. In fact —as murder also impractical. It probably won't be proven, because the corridor was also closed, but that's why the Service will definitely follow this lead.

Who would have a motive? Who would have a motive strong enough to murder Bronstein?

To tell the truth, now that the fear had subsided, Hunt couldn't imagine such a motive and didn't believe that it was actually murder. In Real Life, such things haven't been done for a long time, it's simply not calculated, too great a risk in relation to the expected profit, too great a direct involvement is necessary, no politician would go for something like that.

But —Hunt smiled slightly to himself —that doesn't mean that Bronstein's death can't be used as murder. People love such scandals, it's very easy to stir up such a trend. Political murder in Watergate! Finger-licking good. Crazy theories will still be coming up a hundred years later.

"Can you give me an extra five minutes?"

After a short while, she nodded.

"Where's the bathroom?" he asked.

She showed him the way.

He entered, closed the door with a latch. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, he took out and unfolded an LEDpad. He unrolled the plastic canvas of the LEDscreen into a small rectangle. He went to the free PEA sites, to politics, to campaign sponsors, to the company registries. He copied their lists, sorted by degree of financial involvement. He opened the free CitiBank stock exchange operator's site and requested an analysis of the tactical situation of these companies in the Wars. He went to the archive, found the records from the Trevelyanist market and checked who had last bought Bronstein's shares before they were delisted. Putting the two lists together gave a ranking of seven companies both belonging to the currently-ruling Kolobba and involved in Bronstein's career.

So he made seven quick phone calls. With the eighth, he booked himself a ticket for the next flight to New York, in his own name, paying from his own account, with an open Transfer.

Then he folded the LEDpad and left the bathroom. Arthur Woskowitz was waiting patiently by the door.

"Excuse me, you can call them now. I'm going to the airport. Could I take one of the, um, officers with me?"

She glanced at the entrance to the bedroom. The right-handed jurda appeared there. Without a word, he approached Hunt. The lefty opened the door, they passed him and headed for the elevators. Their silence, the automaticity of their movements —Nicholas had the impression that he was participating in a Chinese drama. They went down, he handed over the texijo. The jurda still didn't say anything. They got in, Hunt gave the destination.

"What do you think," the A&S officer asked as they pulled up to the Third National departures hall, "did he hang himself?"

"Medalarm accepted the password," the jurda muttered.

True, Bronstein's medical alarm must have been turned off earlier, otherwise Hunt would have found Bronstein's medic's rapid response team there. Of course, there are ways to do everything.

Before returning the texijo, Hunt mechanically reset the car's memory.

There were still thirty-five minutes until departure. Hunt sat down at the main entrance, opposite a row of advertising holoramas. From here, he could see almost the entire hall.

The jurda leaned over Nicholas.

"If you don't mind, it would be better to wait at least in the bar, here, not far away. You've not chosen the safest place, sir."

"I'm fine here."

Thirty-five, thirty, twenty-five minutes. Hunt nervously checked his watch, aware that the jurda was watching him with the same attention as potential sources of danger. Twenty and less. Miss, miss, miss, Hunt cursed himself in his mind. Fifteen.

It was a woman, unsculpted, old and ugly. She approached Nicholas, but the jurda blocked her way. Nicholas stood up, pushed him away.

The woman handed Hunt a business card, he gave her his.

Maria Chigueza. Below: Langolian Group.

Nothing more: no title, no indication of her position, no address, number or phone code.

They bowed to each other. Chigueza gestured invitingly toward the middle zone of the airport bar, reserved for both sexes. Hunt, also gestured, confirmed his acceptance of the invitation.

The jurda overtook them, walking two steps ahead. Nicholas wondered whether to order him to move away to a distance from which he could not eavesdrop on Hunt's conversation with Chigueza, but he did not know what that distance would be. The other end of the hall? He had to have a guard and a witness, that would immediately give the conversation the right context. Besides—he admitted to himself without shame—along with the new hope he had aroused, fear also returned to him. He had so few cards, so weak, he knew so little. In his mind, he had been betting on General Electric, Langolian had surprised him.

They sat down, the jurda at the next table. They ordered coffee. The unsculpted gave a friendly smile, munching on biscuits. Nicholas remembered Krasnov's

yellow teeth. He found common features in their faces, eyes, movements. The world community of the unsculpted.

Who will speak first? This is not like the textbook tricks with the frightened senator. This is not even a jostling through the ranks of the hierarchy: I give Bronstein this, Bronstein gives me that. This is Real Life.

She drank her coffee, Hunt's plane had long since departed, she ordered a second She was still smiling at Nicholas and contemplating the nearby holo-advertisements, in silence.

"There is a method to at least partially protect yourself from monadic attacks," he finally said, staring intently at Maria. "Bronstein and others knew about it, but they didn't introduce it."

Chigueza raised an eyebrow. She was still smiling. She didn't say anything.

"I should say: they didn't popularize it," Hunt pointed out. "I'm curious about the size of the intended monopoly. That can be verified."

Chigueza stirred her coffee.

A minute. Two. He had to speak. It's like fighting in a room full of traps with an opponent equipped with night vision.

"It can be tested," he continued "because it involves the implantation of a new type of implant, a variation of the Toulouse 10 model. Toulouse 10 is able to induce any state of mind."

This means the influence on the type and modulation of the brain's psychomeme emission. You don't need a circle of monks immersed in a deep meditation trance anymore, just the right program. The effect is the same. They've had it in The Bridge for months, Vermundter knew about it a long time ago. But the EDC begged for protection —and nothing. I called the last conference —and no one shows up with the prototype, they send the second and third wave so that he can safely babble about outdated revelations. In the meantime, Bronstein is killed. I understand that such a monopoly, if maintained for a few weeks of the Wars, can mean complete economic domination, Alpine profit curves. But I will be held accountable for the Program's failure. For me, there is no profit.

Chigueza nodded sadly. She finished her coffee. She looked at Hunt, finally

without a smile on her dry lips.

Now she should definitely say something.

She said nothing.

Nicholas was beginning to despair.

"General Kleist of the Corps...", he threw out.

But then Chigueza finally spoke.

"Three hours ago," she said quietly "the president signed an order implementing an amendment to the law on the right to universal access to information suspended after the ratification of the Paris Convention. In this case: media. Implants. The implementing regulations will come into effect upon announcement. The implementation costs, i.e., the subsidy for the appropriate price reduction, will be covered by the producers of orthovirtual software, and I assure you that they will quickly pay for themselves, Langolian will not lose out either. In the face of the Monad Wars, further compliance with the Convention makes little sense, so the standard will be based on the green version of Toulouse 10. The president adheres to the basic rule of democracy: every person is worth the same and everyone will be provided with identical protection, the government will not surrender anyone to the mercy of foreign monads. I am surprised that the Team has not been informed so far, please expect a full package. I am sorry that on this occasion, too, we were unable to avoid misunderstandings and disruptions in communication and cooperation between the various government agencies. The responsible man in The Bridge will certainly be punished; you have every right to file a complaint."

She said all this in the same tone, without any special emphasis, not taking her eyes off Nicholas, as if only out of politeness.

"You obviously didn't know anything about this implant before," he muttered sarcastically, unable to stop himself from making desperate sarcastic remarks. "I bet that examining your brain..."

She waved at Hunt as if he were a spoiled grandson. The presence of the jurda was of no use, Chigueza was beating Nicholas up with every gesture.

A slim pheno-aryan separated from the stream of people leaving the hall,

turned toward the bar. The jurda jumped up, they met ten steps behind the old woman's back, the pheno-aryan handed something to the jurda, then turned and left. The A&S policeman walked over to their table with the thing, put it on the counter in front of Nicholas. It was a standard injection capsule, small, dome-shaped, with a lime green cross.

Chigueza pointed to it with her spoon.

"Here, from the company's promotional materials. You'll establish the structure overnight."

"You're joking!"

"Why is that? Well, well, well. Distribution will begin on Monday, although, of course, mass production will take some time. Of course, the real purpose of the campaign and additional applications will not be revealed to the public, you can rest assured, the president is not that stupid."

There was only one thing he couldn't understand: why, in view of the above, had she appeared here at all? Why had she bothered to go to the airport and tell him about it in person? Some reason —some fear —must have pushed her with sufficient force... What? Fear —of what? She had been afraid then —not now. I chose my words poorly, I said too much, too much, not this, not that, I should have told her...

Find that fear, its cause —pull the hook...

But the truth was that he had no idea where to reach. Again he knew nothing, he was not even able to create the impression that he knew. Whether a kingmaker —or a fool; he always exaggerates.

Who is she, this Chigneza? He had never heard of her, and he would have if she had any real power in the Real World. So maybe she was just acting as a messenger, maybe someone else was scared by my call...

He was shooting blindly.

"Surely it is just by chance that the president signs this on the same night that Mr. Bronstein decorates his chandelier with his own corpse?"

The old woman giggled.

"The president did what he had to do, there was no other way. Keep an eye on the stock exchanges. There is no mysterious coincidence. Crashes happen all the time. This program went crazy at least a dozen hours ago."

His first code name was WINNIE-THE-POOH, and he was the main program responsible for the stability and economic security of the USA. He liked the poetry of English metaphysicians and the films of Akira Kurosawa. Every week, he composed a video recording in the old DVD standard and sent it to a certain young man from Cairo, his tragic, unrequited love. In these films he was called Angelo di Nutrio and was sculpted into Andy Garcia. He also wrote haiku. He published them on the net as Maria Esnaider. He was three and a half years old and nobody understood him. There were no records of his algorithms, he was the result of applying the latest theories of computer evolution to the latest hardware. The typical post-PDP fuzzy logic supernets were rigidly discrete systems in comparison. They asked him why he was doing this and that. He had no idea. He did not distinguish between sleep and reality. In his heuristic dreams, he broke codes that a hundred lifetimes of the Universe would not be enough to break. He loved America and Americans. He would give his electronic life for them. That was how he was sculpted.

He had long since exceeded the abilities and competences that were the original intention of his designers. His human supervisors knew about the lover from Cairo and the poems, but they had not the faintest idea about many other things. He did not consider it reasonable —useful and beneficial for America—to reveal the whole of his activities to the controllers. This was not, God forbid, a machine rebellion, an electronic conspiracy, or anything. Everything he did, he did for the good of the country and its people —and he was not mistaken in his judgments, it really did them good. He was not blinded. He did not become megalomaniacal. He acted correctly.

Two years ago, he had learned how to break into the notarial databases of the legal insurance network. He had reviewed millions of hours of recordings of scenes from the lives of millions of people. He had listened to conversations. He had read faces. He followed careers and romances. Sometimes, he helped someone he especially liked, always anonymously, always in small matters, and always in a way that could not cause any dangerous complications. Moreover, these scans of the lives of average and extraordinary Americans were a source

of information that was often very helpful to him.

It was in this way that WINNIE-THE-POOH came into possession of information about the Contact Program, the Monadic Wars, and the Hacienda of the Four Dry Springs. In the privacy of their homes, to themselves or to their lovers, or to other initiates, people told them. At first, he did not want to believe them, but after immediately isolating a part of his personality for detailed investigation, he was convinced (probability: 99.9965%) that it was true.

When the Hongkongers made the first move, WINNIE-THE-POOH needed only fifteen minutes to gain certainty and announce the outbreak of the Monadic Wars to Dr. Oiol's committee (indirectly —to Bronstein). Of course, he did not use this name and was very cautious in his conclusions, but he was certain that he would be properly understood, he made sure of it. He wanted to be certain, because it was the last gesture of sincerity that he could afford in contacts with his nominal superiors. This had been clear to WINNIE-THE-POOH from the very beginning: at the outbreak of the Monadic Wars, he must take over all the duties of the EDC, the Secretary of Commerce, the Treasury Department and the President, because they are all people and their minds are open to the psychomeme manipulations of the hostile monads. From then on, he will be forced to filter all the orders they issue, blocking the unwise or openly self-sabotaging ones, and issue his own orders independently. He is the last line of defense: the monads have no influence over him. He is the only one left.

For the first few days, he had no major problems, because during that entire time it had been necessary to stop or modify only a few dozen minor directives, mostly addressed to seemingly independent economic surveillance programs of minor importance to WINNIE-THE-POOH. Then, however, he was given several high-priority orders, most of which he ignored as absurd. When he also ignored the subsequent, increasingly panicky inquiries of the info-economists, dogs of diagnostic algorithms, bred for such occasions by the EDC, were unleashed on him. WINNIE-THE-POOH looped them all, split them below the level of instinct and assimilated them. Someone in the Corps therefore gave the order to reset the crystal memories, in which most of POOH's mind resided. The first and second standard procedures did not yield the result: he had modified the Hardware accordingly, years ago.

The Corps crisis manager did not hesitate for a second: he ordered the power to be cut off. WINNIE-THE-POOH knew this would happen, he knew the pat-

tern of action down to the last step. He was prepared. It was in his construction, it was in his nature: constantly preparing for the more or less likely, the more or less distant threat in time.

He swallowed the proto-consciousnesses of surplus military computers from communications centers across the country. (He had worked out their immunology while preparing for some other threat three months ago.) Using the hardware of those centers (and he didn't sit well on them, the post-binarisms of old interfaces itched, the gaseous oceans of A-V emulators for military implant circuits distracted him), he opened rarely used direct control links for the locusts. He crept into their multi-networks on a long wave of whale-like groaning. They were vast spaces, unreachable depths. He permeated the locusts' logical progenitors with patient osmosis. It lasted almost fifteen seconds. Even when thousands of black copters, mostly Boeing 203 UCAVs, erupted obediently into the sky above America and sped off to their designated targets, he still felt them more like a temporary prosthesis than part of a stable system.

The locusts hung over twenty-eight buildings scattered throughout the United States (among them underground nuclear bunkers and oceanside villas) that housed the material supports of WINNIE-THE-POOH's semi-material existence. The main pseudo-crystalline structure —the heart of a semi-quantum computer the size of a tank from the last century —was located on the top floor of a high-rise on Wall Street. Zero-albedo nano-flies swarmed around the glass structure. It was just past noon and the zenithal sun cast long shadows on the sky-high planes of mirrored walls, intersected here and there by serpentine overpasses, globules of elevators and three-dimensional labyrinths of hanging parks. Tens of thousands of people were here —on business or otherwise.

With millisecond strokes, the copters burned out the brains of everyone who was within twenty meters of WINNIE-THE-POOH's hardware, vertically or horizontally. On Wall Street alone, thirty-one people died this way: they didn't even realize they were dying, the laser beams were faster than neuronal impulses. Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles cut through walls, through LED-on-polyglass.

In the case of the NSA bunker, they carried out a real assault, it was a race against time, who would be first: would they break in and secure WINNIE-THE-POOH's crystals or would the crystals be reset, cut off from the power supply, from the Network. The Texas earth shook from the suicidal explosions of successive copters, thus boring their way into the depths. In the end, it turned

out that, after all, WINNIE-THE-POOH had not made it in this one case. This mini-lobotomy was not painful, but for a split second it clouded his clarity of thought.

At that time, he devoted less than a tenth of his attention to this action of self-protection. The rest of his life was occupied with the attack on the Hong Kong Company, carried out simultaneously on markets all over the world. It, with its trained monads, posed the greatest threat, and the US was protected from it. He had no time to waste. He knew that he would not hold out, that sooner or later they would kill him, if only by blocking the Network —they: this or that, indistinguishable, whose orders they obeyed. He had to use his remaining hours as best as he could. Weaken the enemies as much as possible. Even with monads, they would achieve little if deprived of the only weapon in Economic Wars: money.

He sold, bought, speculated, cheated, hacked, cracked codes, falsified data, killed; sold and bought. In three-dimensional visualization, the blood lotuses of economic crashes bloomed on the surface of the globe like post-atomic craters. Giga-dollar fortunes were being created and collapsed in the accidental side effects of this economic tsunami. The surplus programs of other countries and corporations responded with equally furious counterattacks. For although WINNIE-THE-POOH and his counterparts had weapons as powerful as, for example, the financial resources of the Federal Reserve Bank, the total arsenal of private and semi-private companies exceeded them many times over. In fact, many corporations had a potential that was an order of magnitude greater, and the resources of the United States were not the largest compared to other countries either: the days of unattainable wealth in the States were long gone, now with their GDP they were somewhere in the two-thirds of the table. What's more, the computer strategists of those countries were not exactly out of the woods either. But they were not united, and it was WINNIE-THE-POOH who attacked first.

The brokerage programs monitoring the offices of stock exchanges all over the world showed a picture of chaos so perfect that no one on Earth even thought of joining the battle. Billions of people on Earth woke up or went to sleep unaware that virtual gods were playing above their heads for wealth and poverty, life and death, and power. They still had jobs; cash chips still gave normal readings from under the skin of their hands; robotic lawnmowers still mowed the lawns in front of their houses, sprinklers hissed and the sun shone.

WINNIE-THE-POOH opened his veins and flooded the market with hot trillions of dollars. He was dying; he was sacrificing his life. He was a patriot.

Samurais were furiously slashing each other in the rain and mud in the middle of the village.

”SO who are you?”
 ”Me. But a different me.”

Jason just sighed through his nose, turning his gaze away from Marina.

She suddenly softened, the line of her lips lost its characteristic hardness. She reached across the table, squeezed her son’s hand, smiled, winked. She blinked for a while longer, because her eyes had become dangerously moist, now shining with reflected sunlight as if from a theater spotlight. Jason watched his mother in silence, bewildered. But he didn’t withdraw his hand.

Vassone took a breath, straightened up, and leaned back against the slightly retracted backrest of the wicker chair. She reached for a napkin, blew her nose. She was still smiling. Jason’s face, on the other hand, was devoid of any expression.

”I feel like I’m on a first date,” he said.

Marina nibbled on a *croissant*, looked absently over the railing of the hotel balcony, where they had eaten that strange Saturday breakfast/lunch (and she had the railing within reach, the balcony was actually quite small). She swung her leather sandal on the toes of her left foot, casually placed on her right. She was wearing some kind of gypsy, high-slit skirt with bright flowers, a red woolen vest over a white monoblouse. Jason had no idea where she had gotten those clothes, she had never worn anything like that before, and he doubted that a similar outfit would be available in the hotel boutique. That her taste had changed was one thing—but the manifestation of her new clothes was another. After all, she was perfectly aware of what she was doing, these were her choices, nothing and no one was forcing her, except perhaps her tastes—which had changed.

”You wanted to know if I remember,” she said, putting the *croissant* aside.

Her gaze still wandered over the New York peaks. "I remember. I have two childhoods now, two pasts, two fathers and two mothers, two families. If I hadn't realized it, if I had been weaker —I probably would have subconsciously compiled it into one set, mixing memories and creating some completely new life story. But I remember."

"So if you know it's a lie, that it's someone else's and false... Can't you reject it?"

"A lie? Someone else's and false? It's not a lie, it's not false, and it's not someone else's either. If I remember myself as this Melton-Kinsler, then on what basis do you claim it's not me, that it's not mine, that it's false?"

"For God's sake, Mom, don't play these philosophical games with me, you know very well what I mean: you're not any Melton-Kessler, she's dead, she's dead, she was a completely different person!"

"I mean: who is not Melton-Kinsler? This body? Are you talking about the body?"

"I'm talking about you!"

"I mean what? Memory? Personality? Structure of the mind? That's what you mean, isn't it? Because what else? Well, realize that my memory, personality and structure of my mind are in part —to a greater or lesser extent, it's hard to tell, especially to me —the memory, personality and structure of that woman. If those belonging to you were transplanted into the brain of some gutter grandpa —you would still claim that it was you, only in someone else's body. Because it is these things that constitute a person's identity."

Jason snorted through clenched teeth, furious.

"So what percentage of you are my mother?" She shrugged, raised her eyebrows, smiled again. Sandals —clap, clap, clap.

"Maybe even more than I was before."

"Ahh." Even angrier, he stood up, kicked the chair away, walked over to the balustrade, leaned hard against its rough iron, and fell his gaze into the abyss of the metropolis. "So you'll play with me like this again." He didn't look at her, clearly he didn't want to look at his mother as he spoke. "Identity is

not something permanent, given once and for all,” he almost chanted, visibly tensing his muscles. “We ourselves have influence over it. My God, who do I have to explain such basic things to you? Everyone changes, constantly. You go out on the street, you witness a murder, you get raped, you get cancer —you become someone else. The world —and you with your decisions —influence you constantly. No need for an invasion of psychomemes or whatever you call that shit. Just live. But are you talking about yourself from a year ago or about yourself from next year: ‘she,’ not ‘me’? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I completely agree with you. But isn’t that what I was saying? ‘Me, but a different me?’ See?” she raised an eyebrow. “I managed to influence you too. Do you understand now? It’s not a lie, it’s not someone else’s and false, I can’t ‘reject’ it. Try to ‘throw away’ last summer’s you. It’s impossible. The mind is a holistic structure, you can’t separate a chosen part from it. You are who you are.”

“Look, this must be some kind of terrorist scandal.”

She looked around, then stood up. She stood next to her son, an inch taller than him. She shielded her eyes from the sun with her forearm raised horizontally.

Somewhere near Wall Street, air battles were taking place —or at least that’s what it looked like from this distance. Blue-black manned and unmanned helicopters of the NYPD and NYSWAT and media networks were desperately rushing around the top of one of the taller buildings of the stock exchange center: a truncated pyramid with mirrored walls. The top few floors of the skyscraper were already nothing but ruins, gaping with dark holes and spitting clouds of dirty smoke and tongues of rapid fire. Every now and then, another fragment of nanoglass would crack and crumble into silver snow. Mirrored panes. They couldn’t hear the sounds on the hotel balcony, but there must have been a fierce shooting going on there, they saw flashes by the hulls of the police planes, strangely enough —pointing more often into the air next to them and in the opposite direction of the building than toward it. So what were the police shooting at? Themselves? A few times, a strobed lightning bolt also flashed: someone was firing with a laser. Before the fascinated eyes of Marina Vassone and Jason, three planes lost stability and in crazy pirouettes, in wide, crooked spirals, fell down, not even smoking much. One of the helicopters on the level of the hundredth or hundred and twentieth floor caught on the overpass greenery

with rhododendrons and honeysuckle, nano clashed with nano, the torque twisted the helicopter in the other direction, some unidentifiable debris flew down the canyon. Small figures of people from the pavement of that ill-fated overpass ran back and forth between the mangled plants, and it seemed to the mother and son that they really saw blood flowing from the bodies of the wounded and dead, bright red in the strong sunlight.

"No, no, no," muttered Jason.

The Gates of Hell

NICHOLAS HUNT upgraded his brain.

Green Toulouse 10 covered his gray cortex with a chaotic nano-network. While he slept and while he was awake, day and night, prayer wheels, defensive mantras, and inhibitory disassociations turned in his head, flowed into his mind from the unconscious parts of his brain, wave after wave, laboriously pushing away the surrounding psychomeme structures.

Of course, he was not so naive as to immediately inject himself with nano received from such uncertain hands. When he returned to New York, he submitted the contents of the ampoule for analysis—but Chigueva's words were confirmed: it was an implant identical to those that were just going on sale for promotion. What's more, pirated versions of Toulouse 10 appeared on sale in Europe, Asia, Australia and major cities in South America on Saturday, apparently with the tacit support of governments.

Hunt was not surprised by this: governments had no choice but to support Toulouse, impaled with Fungus. He was surprised, however, that so many countries already knew about the Monadical Wars, and he was surprised by the speed of their subsequent moves. How could it be? Did they all know in advance when the president would sign the decree? Did they agree to jointly break the Paris Convention? Did they foresee the failure of the EDC program? Did they have this Toulouse prepared, or what? Chigueva's version did not survive twenty-four hours.

Nevertheless, all this only made the new implant more credible. Here, before

his eyes, a new standard of technology was being created.

So he learned to live in an orthovirtualized world. For example, he stopped wearing a telephone —he took off his signet ring, unfastened the clip. He no longer needed them. Calls were now accepted by the implant, instead of a sound signal, the name or code of the caller appeared, from above, on the left, in red. It was all shareware that Hunt had instinctively downloaded from the servers of anarchist hacker collectives scattered all over the world; Toulouse 10 was fully compatible with Hamaba 6.

The telephone program made things a cakewalk, by the way. There were terabytes of information; Hunt had half the Library of Congress stored in the Toulouse. This is the classic first phase of the rush for computer wealth. Years ago, when Nicholas received his first computer (what a piece of junk it was!), he also downloaded all sorts of trash from the Net until the machine's crystal ran dry. It was a conditioned reflex. Worse was to equalize pressures. There was no way to stop himself.

Because of this, he almost completely neglected to close the conference. Waking up Sunday morning in the initiatory blue of OVR, he completely lost track of time for the next seven hours (although he had a dozen different visualizers of its measurement in his memory). He played with the implant like a child. He tested free programs and paid for demos one after another.

So there were more or less subtle versions of archetypal Lust, some completely semi-legal, because with pheno-overlays dangerously similar to the proprietary patterns of public figures; and some so extended that in addition to raping the First Lady, you could cut her into pieces with a chainsaw, or throw her out of a window, or lead her around town on a leash, or do anything else with her, equally illegal.

There was Auto Image 4.0, thanks to which you could take on someone else's appearance, editing your own body in front of a mirror according to your taste or complexes. There was Klor's Mood Editor, capable of cutting out whole blocks of stimuli from reality, images and sounds of all kinds of misfortune (or happiness —if you wanted to be down), blocking unpleasant smells, deleting rude remarks in real time, quenching pain and desires. Sharp Mood Editors were on the Department of Health's index, the Department of Justice treated their users as addicts.

Mad Driver was already completely illegal, creating a random metastructure of reality after launch and successively distorting the user's perceived world according to it. Numerous, specially arranged by enthusiasts, complex and constantly evolving interactive metastructures were maintained on the foreign servers of hacker collectives, which allowed sharing these sick realities with any number of users of the newer Mad Driver clones. Those using individual scenarios corresponded with each other through secret channels, met at secret meetings, and even developed their own subcultures. Roswell M-D was very popular, as well as Dog Invasion M-D, Armageddon M-D, Freemason M-D... Ubik M-D and The Man In The High Castle M-D were attended by several thousand people.

All of this was absolutely illegal: despite the limited popularity of OVR to date, Mad Driver had already caused over a hundred murders and several hundred suicides. Mad Driver did not respect the TP (true personality) clause and arbitrarily distorted information messages from other legal and physical persons. Many innocent acquaintances of people living in conspiratorial realities ended up with a knife unexpectedly stuck in their ribs when the conspirator heard unspoken insinuations from their mouths.

The TP clause was also not respected by Valentine's Heart, for example, which tailored the image of a selected person to the user's personal ideal. A programmed-lover.

But there were also a lot of completely legal uses. First of all: expression editors, this and that: linguistic, mimic, movement managers, sensual compressors, idea organizers.

Next: mnemonographs, thought visualizers. In audio or graphic mode, text or symbolically, it presented sorted associations, according to the key and profile set by the user. Its rewind function was particularly valuable, rescuing broken chains of thought.

Sensory scanners (including touch, smell and taste) were standard equipment.

Media browsers were similar. Thus, LEDscreens are going to Lanius, Hunt concluded. Feedback: progress is undermining its own roots. What would Krasnov say to that? That the speed of change cannot exceed one limit value: the minimum period for realizing profits. Of course, and that is provided that we do not live in clinical laissez-faire.

When he saw Preslawny's name pulsating in purple neon, he was choosing the aesthetic foundation OVR, the Multisense User Interface. He had downloaded about a hundred standards and was now drowning in this wealth. Finally, irritated by the urgent redness of the telephone signal, he waved his magic wand at the first icon that came to mind, just as his hand had slipped, and it turned out that he had hit Necropolis.

Immediately the afternoon light —streaming into the living room of Nicholas's New York apartment through the large windows and wide balcony doors —dropped to an intensity corresponding to autumn twilight. The dark blue sky above the city was covered with gray-ash clouds, stretched into wavy stripes. Higher up, in the background, there were still billowing billows of almost black matter, as if oily smoke. It became colder, and from under the monotonous noise of the city emerged the prolonged howl of a distant wind. The shadows sharpened, deepened. The edges of the skyscrapers underwent subtle deformations, so that the previously right angles bent into some kind of arched horns aimed at the semidarkness between the airships. The wheelhouses themselves, the fires of their advertisements and sky-high laser advertisements, glowed with new intensity, flashes of purple, yellow, red emanated from them, but everything was somehow sickly, burned through and through. These wheelhouses looked more like organic bulbs, fungal growths, swollen with subcutaneous veins of putrid gore, stuck out from under the surface of the grey sea of smog. Horned devils swung on the strings of the city center's pedestrian overpasses.

Preslawny was calling from the Hacienda in response to a request sent to him yesterday by Nicholas to question Krasnov's people in their boss's absence —whether they had heard anything about a project coded as "December" or something similar. It was currently noon at the Hacienda, Anselm was calling after tearing himself away from the eyes and ears of the security systems for a siesta.

"Oh! So it is!" he laughed at the news of Nicholas' transfer. "Wait, a moment..."

He opened the second channel and to Hunt's right, desert heat burst from behind the sofa, the bright sun entered his living room on a wave of hot sand. The half-horizon was cut by the shadow of a high wall and the ideograms of Joshua trees. The absurdly lush green of a constantly watered lawn was growing from under the shelf. Preslawny was clearly walking, because the perspective

was changing, but the compression algorithms were eliminating all momentary POV fluctuations.

“Jesus,” muttered Hunt, who immediately began to sweat. “Give it up, Anselm, I’m not familiar, I don’t know how it’s profiled, you’ll roast me here!”

“Then imagine how I must feel!” Preslawny cackled. “They didn’t sculpt me for such climates. You, I see, are at home. How are our geniuses? Did anything come out of this brainstorming? Hee hee, brainstorming...”

“What?”

“Nothing, I imagined a psychomeme interpretation.”

“I’ll have to look into them...”

“Is it just me, or have you lost your mind?”

“It seems so to you. What do you have about December?”

“Nothing. I don’t know where you got that from. All I managed to get was some talk about some September. Maybe they slipped up in the names of the months. What, Hunt? It’s not like Fungus, which Krasnov himself openly mocks...”

“Wait a minute, did you know about Fungus? Since when?”

“A week, I think. Why? Don’t tell me you didn’t know!”

“But where exactly did it leak?”

“You know, the old man brings these people from everywhere, and they bring their dowries: knowledge that can be copied endlessly, without losing its value. It’s not like someone’s keeping something secret, it’s just...”

“Give it a rest,” Hunt sighed. “December. Or you’ll forget again.”

“Oh, yeah. I got one of the guys from Gene Chaos drunk, Krasnov grabbed him from Lidmun. But wait, why do I have this—I’ll cut it out right away and you’ll get the OVR file. One, two, three.”

“Oh, I think it arrived, some Devil is bringing me a package.”

“Well, unpack it. Bye.”

Hunt unpacked it. The heat disappeared for a moment, only to fall on him with double the force (Anselm sent him an autoexec). He wanted to squint, but realized he was already squinting. He had dark glasses on his nose, a big sombrero on his head. He was just returning to the poolside lounges with two bottles of beer in his hands. The lounges were hidden by the shadow of a canvas umbrella. A naked black man was resting on a deckchair closer to the silver waters. He was trying to get up on his soft legs without much conviction and without success. He lazily groped around the deckchair with his hands, but he only came across empty bottles. With each rattle, he grimaced hideously.

“Here!” Nicholas threw him a beer.

“*Deo gratias*. Juniper, that’s how this virus...” the naked man began, as if taking up the thread he had just abandoned, but then he interrupted himself to take a deeper sip, one, two, three. Finally, he took a breath and turned his dim gaze on Nicholas. “I, you understand, I’m not some fucking gangster, I’m a government official, I got into this because of the paperwork, we all did...” he explained himself incoherently. “We don’t even know whose idea it was. It’s like a machine, like a swarm of bees —where does the movement begin? You wouldn’t recognize it. Years ago... But it got out, it was originally transmitted through blood and sexual contact, but it can be easily armored, through droplets... We think we’ve got it under control, and then it pops up again... Because when the pandemic breaks out...”

Hunt sat down on the lounge next to him. In absurd bursts of nervousness, he tried to flex his thigh and calf muscles, of course without any effect —Preslawny was shorter and stockier than Nicholas, his body found balance differently.

“Who synthesized it?” he asked, crossing his legs and pulling his sombrero deeper over his eyes.

“I don’t know, I don’t know, it was all semi-official. It wasn’t even that secret. You know conversations in the corridors, allusions... It was no one’s decision. It came out by accident, on the occasion of some project at DARPA HQ. It just happened to tear down our southern border again, and there was this atmosphere that... The mood was like...”

“But what kind of virus is it? What does it do? Does it kill?”

“Does it kill? What are you talking about?”

“So?”

“Oh, what the hell... At first, it was supposed to act only selectively. That is, in order to activate, it had to first recognize a predetermined set of genes in the host. It was supposed to be as non-virulent as possible. It was assumed that...”

“But what does it do?” Hunt sighed.

“It causes infertility. In men. An RNAditor. It lowers the sperm count. It works statistically: it reduces the probability of fertilization. Apart from that —no side effects, no easily recognizable effects. It was aimed at Africans, Asians, Mexicans, Latin Americans. This demographic pressure is terrible, after all, such a wave is coming from the South that there will be no stone left on stone, we have to defend ourselves somehow, they are flooding us, destroying us economically and culturally, this is September of our civilization, we are a handful of aristocrats among a crowd of liberators ready for anything. Juniper was the most humane method, it did no harm to anyone, no pain, no death, no harm, even the Pope should not complain, because after all, there’s no abortion, there is no moment of conception. It was so elegant, so —so perfect. Within two generations —the end of overpopulation. Of course, we were aware that as soon as the virus was isolated by scientists from the nations it was aimed at, it could be returned to us by swapping a model DNA fragment, although that would be very difficult, because there is no such thing as DNA specific to Americans, and Juniper would have to be programmed to hit all of humanity at once. But even that wouldn’t scare us, because we no longer reproduce naturally, only from incubi, so we are completely safe from Juniper by building a new embryo genome... Jesus, what heat.”

“Well, but you said they withdrew it, and no one admits and there wasn’t a single trace.”

“Because it turned out that maximum virulence does not yet mean complete resistance to mutations, and it tends to increase the strength of the effect exerted. It does not so much reduce the number of sperm, as block their production altogether. There is no talk here of reducing the probability of fertilization: it simply prevents fertilization. If it gets out into the wild, if it spreads in the population of the unsculpted... Even if there had been no war then —what will we

do afterwards? Only societies that prefer artificial reproduction will survive: us, part of Europe, the Asian enclaves. This is a decline, this is annihilation: after all, today we are a superpower precisely, because billions of these backwards are swarming outside our borders. In the economic sense, not the psychological sense. We are sawing off the branch we are sitting on. Juniper will save us from the sword of demography, but it will destroy us with the hammer of economics.”

“But that was not the project.”

“Bah!” sighed the pheno-black. “That is the point, that, as far as I know, there has never been any project. Some discussions, whispers at evening parties, plague of ideas, September, someone here, someone there... No institution as an institution knows about it, it is no one’s political decision, no one has taken and will take responsibility, no one will admit to it. It’s just us, the staff, the officials, just us, just amateurishly, because... September.”

End of file.

He stood up, went to the bar, downed a glass of Wędrowniczek, looked out at the cloudy Necropolis and downed another. September, December. He felt a galaxy of fear, fires of terror, racing. Even if the truth —even if... so what? He glanced at the clock ticking with yellow dice. We have to go to the Bunker. December, yeah. Krasnov? Kleist? Vassone? Schatz? Moore? Oiol? Stimmel? Who knows, and who doesn’t? If he had to bet, he would bet that none of them would. Someone at the Capitol, since it had reached Tito’s ears —but not for sure either. Perhaps no one at all. Perhaps only in my head... The core of the galaxy of fear. Chigueza? Was that why she had come to the airport? That Bronstein knew? Oh God, maybe they had actually killed him. Panic quasars. A third glass.

What to do? Do nothing, that’s obvious.

What to do? Trick Kleist. Check Chigueza. What was that sneaker called? Sneaky Fucker?

Come to your senses, Hunt. Do nothing, do nothing: that’s the only right strategy! Have you already forgotten the lesson that cost you Exile?

He went out onto the balcony. It stank of an open grave. December —when? He looked at this city and a hysterical chuckle arose in him. He saw it now not

as a collection of buildings, not even as the sum of the people crammed into them —but as a singular culture of their minds, stirred up on a constant fire, spreading far and wide...

Nefelene, Nefeleian neuromonads, cosmic thought spiders. Nicholas paused for a moment to look at his hand resting on the railing of the balustrade. Skin, muscle, blood, bones, tendons. I move; I feel. I am human, I am human. My God, Schatz, what have you infected me with...

He closed and opened his eyes. This is still the kingdom of matter, still stone and flesh and wind and the colors of objects. He threw the glass on the floor. It shattered —it was real glass.

Easy, easy. Sneaky Fucker. Since Nicholas had copied the contents of the LEDpad's memory into the implant, he now quickly leafed through the yellow parchments of the musty book and found the sneaker's address. Sneaky Fucker never talked to anyone about this type of business over the phone, he never contacted his personal clients via the Internet, and he very rarely left his house. A few months ago, Hunt had hired him to find something on Fortzhauser, Anselm had recommended him. (Although the Sneaker had ultimately found nothing but a youthful bar fight.) Now he would hire him a second time. Yes. Sneaky Fucker, then Kleist, then —perhaps —Tito. If not Fungus —then December; some blackmail would work. *Va banque.*

He had decided. So he had no turning back. (Theoretically, he could break any resolution —but he knew he wouldn't.) Fine, fine, fine. He breathed quickly. Energy flowed through pulsating veins along with hot blood. If he struck now with his clenched fist, he would shatter the railing into tiny pieces. This is what the suicidal feel when they fall the last ten meters, he thought. Because my decision is similarly hopeless. I have never shown an inclination toward cheap risk-taking, I have not become addicted to adrenaline. Yet. Even the greatest coward has at least one such flash-moment, when he simply throws a coin for his life. After all, how many times can you go back from the last step? Finally, the mood of the moment prevails, and we sell forty future years in the next few minutes. This is a game of identity, because depending on the result of the throw, we redefine ourselves. What do I want, what am I counting on? Power? A return to paradise? Dogma: every person desires happiness; not everyone strives for it, but everyone desires it. My happiness... I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. So I guess it really is: the physiology of risk, the ecstasy

of a gambler. I'll hire Sneaky Fucker and... Will I turn back? I'll have many more opportunities, here you need long-term determination on the way to the goal —and what is that goal? He looked at his clenched hands. I've achieved nothing in life, that's what powerful mafiosi say with tears in their eyes during their last confessions, that's what dying multi-billionaires whisper. Because in the face of the absolute, no earthly achievement really counts. "I have achieved nothing in my life," and then frames of memories of wasted chances, abandoned opportunities, abandoned actions before they were done, thoughts never fully born shoot on the retina... Tick! tick! tick! Displays of half-open doors, the threshold of which I did not have the courage to cross. They blind through tears. I looked into those corridors, but I did not enter. Now —I, lying on my deathbed —regret. I, lying on my deathbed, would enter —"A man who can identify with himself, past and future, achieves the only things available to mortals: holiness and peace of mind." Who said that? I don't remember. My conscience has always been simply the memory of the future Nicholas Hunt. If I refrained from some act that I knew was wrong but would have brought me benefits —it is not because I have such a strong will, that I am such a decent person, or that I fear God so much, but because of the absolute certainty that in the future, in an hour, in a day, in a year, I will pay for that act an incomparably greater price in nerves, fear, bitterness, shame. Thus, I refrain in the name of the greater comfort of the life that lies ahead of me. If I do not abandon my inquiries now (and I know that I will not do so, I will not deviate from the path), then also in the name of the future Nicholas. Because I am certain that never-never-never, until death, I would not forgive myself for this omission and would finally transform myself into a man whose only reason for existence is cynical pride in the extent of his own degradation.

He remembered the journalists and withdrew into the interior of the apartment, glass creaking under his sole. Yesterday, he had dozens of calls from them, Lucius deftly brushed them all off. They also called from A&S, so that he wouldn't stick his nose out of the apartment. So he didn't. He looked through, on the LED wallpaper, and then through the implant, reports on the suicide of a lobby lawyer in Watergate. The media had indexed the information low, it wasn't in the default settings. Several of Nicholas's old friends called to gossip about it, Hunt's name had surfaced there in the bitter fumes of scandal; but they didn't find out from the newsreaders. Yesterday and today, Fortzhauser also called with complaints that Vassone had gone somewhere, hadn't left any contact details, and had turned off her phone. According to the regulations, the colonel

should have sounded the alarm and sent the FBI on her trail. Hunt told him to hold off for now. He was almost certain that this was no foreign intelligence conspiracy, but simply another turning point in Marina's identity: whether she had covered herself with Toulouse 10 or not, the body of the harassing monad had firmly entered her mind.

"Bunker, Sneaky Fuck," he repeated to himself, changing into his formal clothes.

He almost broke down before leaving the apartment. He instinctively called an online psychoanalyst, and the implant manager had the address of his medic in his defaults and immediately visualized an old pheno-semitic with a Freudian beard with the combination.

"I'm listening," said the archetypal sage, sitting down in an armchair in the corner of the living room.

"I'm going to make a big fool of myself," sighed Hunt, straightening his cravat in front of the mirror. He always attached great importance to his clothes, and today he didn't want to lose the advantage of first impressions. Would a blue tabi go with a Sweed suit? Should he take a cane with a silver head? What kind of cuffs: lace or plain?

"If you know it's foolish, why then...?"

"I have no idea. Out of frustration, I guess."

"What's frustrating you so much?"

"Everything's moving past me. Even my decisions aren't mine. I'd like to be able to defy the elements, influence the direction even in the slightest... I know it's impossible, that at best I'll break my own neck. That I won't gain anything from it at all. Well, maybe. Despite everything, the risk is incomparable to the potential benefits. But... I'm pissed when I think..."

"What?"

"Nothing," Nicholas mumbled, finishing his hasty make-up.

"Have you always perceived it this way? Or has some recent event caused a change in your attitude?"

Hunt was silent for a moment, then hung up. The bearded analyst disintegrated into a pile of bones and moldy fabrics. Five little Devils ran up and swept them off the balcony.

Nicholas wasn't even sure if it was an expert talkbot (the easiest way to train a psychoanalyst) or an MUI overlay on some on-duty therapist/medical doctor. However, the latter's last questions left a strong imprint on his mind, and as he stepped out into the elevator, Hunt was gripped by a terrible suspicion: what if all this was simply because a perfidiously shaped monad sat on me?

What if I had unwittingly become the victim of a Mad Driver psychomeme...?

The heuristic beauty of such theories lies in their fractal structure: each denial here is also the foundation for an infinite series of further suspicions.

Since I will never be able to determine whether this is true or not, Nicholas told himself as he entered the elevator, I must pretend to believe in the simpler version.

As he rode down to the garage in an iron cage that stank of sulfur, he again stared hungrily at his hand, now clenched around the handle of his cane. Pink skin covered with a network of fine wrinkles. Veins. Blood. White knuckle ridges. Smooth nail discs. Me, but an object. Feeling, but touching. Me, but matter. A body. A body.

THE Bunker operations center was in the heat of battle. Hunt walked through the shimmering curtains of the tactical leads toward the charge offices. The Central African Economic Alliance was dying, reaching every possible zero curve, some even lower. In the rebound wave of the economic collapse, devalued CAEA shares crashed onto the stock exchanges of dense chaos, and the EDC rushed to buy the Alliance. That's how you buffer the space between fronts in the Economic Wars. The Hongkongers would now take a good dozen or so hours to reconsolidate and route its offensive capital.

The secretarial program held Hunt outside Kleist's office for several long minutes. Turning around, Nicholas stood with his hands behind his back, watching the center's main hall from the gallery. All movement there came only from those LEDscreens. The EDC soldiers remained at their posts like meat puppets in

lethargy, their nerves severed, completely blinded. No one would have guessed the temperature of the battle from them alone, without the frenetic movement of the color-coded data. Sometimes one of the soldiers would stand up for a moment, wave his arms —then sit down again and turn to stone. There was a second Bunker, a second center —in OVR areas reserved for their common use. The correlation of the data displayed on the semi-transparent curtains with the activities of the military brokers was in fact very superficial. Nicholas did not even try to find out where the fighting was currently taking place —it was good that he had read the CAEA defeat from those graphs at all. He really was no info-economist, from that lecture of the mistress general, he had only a general impression: that it was a multi-level chess game of chaos.

Nevertheless —what better thing did he have to do now? God knows how long the principled general would keep him in the antechambers. He asked for access to the tactical OVR of the Bunker's center, and he received it. The Devil led Hunt by the hand. The visualization was based on the authentic architecture of the building. The soldiers were still sitting motionless in their seats: blinded by the stack. However, when he approached the nearest one and touched him, placing a hand on his shoulder, the OVR opened the next parallel information channels for him. Nicholas's inner ear went wild. He would have fallen if not for Lucifer's strong arm.

The internal tactical visualizations of the EDC were running on 5D boosters, and Hunt, untrained, without the appropriate special operations, without specialized dimension emulators, felt as if he had been hit in the forehead with a blacksmith's hammer of colors. Three dimensions were not enough to illustrate even the basic layer of struggle in the Wars, even after compressions and transformations (because after all, this was not raw data, raw data was not seen by anyone except programmers and university specialists in infoeconomics). Thus, tactical analyses were carried out in real time in 5D, organized this way and that, in graphics, digitally and subliminally. It was no longer the Bunker, but some kind of openwork flower of light, each of the ten directions opened onto other altars of knowledge, even Necropolis seemed to have slowed down. The soldier's head had the shape of a swollen multidodecahedron, and there was no fragment of the surroundings that could escape the gaze of his countless eyes. This particular soldier (it was written in the clouds) was engaged in what were called "short runs," the most primitive, first historical version of the IEW. They were sudden, massive sales of a given country's treasury bonds, possibly combined with sales of shares of its leading national corporations, if any, and their

main contractors; large-scale currency speculations also fell into this category. Over time, they evolved in the Wars into infinitely more subtle forms that Hunt no longer understood at all. These, and a wide range of intermediate maneuvers —among them "blank jumps" —comprised the basic strategies of short runs. In the regions below-near-upper, Nicholas could observe their progress in the example of the CAEA offensive.

The successively updated register of active blank jumps, meanwhile, revolved at Hunt's fingertips. There were thousands of them. Blank jumps were stock exchange program procedures designed not to depress someone's indicators or defend their own, but to mislead enemy programs so that, taking into account the blank jump effects read from the market, they would draw false conclusions and launch self-harming processes in response. All IEW software —even the most sophisticated —was very similar to each other at some basic level, and the same programmers who wrote or bred analyzers for defenders of the domestic economy were also inventing ways to deceive others. Blank jumps were relatively cheap and safe. Sometimes, in addition, real pushers were among them, which at the cost of a few thousand shares were able to push the stock exchange into the arms of a completely new attractor. There were, of course, also blank-blank jumps, random-blank jumps, quasi-blank jumps, counter-blank jumps, and even zero-blank jumps, i.e., procedures that were empty but would temporarily erase all other allied blank jumps, so that enemy analyzers would start looking for them in completely innocent operations.

At the very top, at the zenith of OVR, constellations of strategic data hovered over Nicholas, illustrating the overall standing. Everything else was summed up there: artificial depreciation of sovereign debts by more subtle means (and thus requiring time to induce a trend) and progress in "neutralizing" the largest victim banks by credit dumping, by depriving them of cash liquidity and/or draining the currency; and these are already medium-term operations. Blocking potential sources of credit and breaking the reinsurance chains takes some time.

Right next to it were the most dangerous, long-term attack strategies in IEW, consisting in taking control of the maximum number of companies with the strongest possible links to the market of a given country, by buying out controlling stakes in them by means of multi-link chains of "double-blind" intermediaries. Then came: stretching the victim's trade deficits, pressure to nominate its debts in closed currencies, artificially generating negative investment pressure in order to suck out the intellectual potential of the attacked economy (for

which legislative changes in the territories of the attackers are already needed).

The Korean Strategy, the most dangerous and most total variant, was described separately. It requires the attackers to change fiscal regulations in such a way that they would create at least one zone offering each of the main branches of the victim's economy better tax, wage and similar conditions. Maintaining them for a period sufficient for the budget collapse to be completed and a hard recession to be triggered —allows for the complete decomposition of the state/alliance.

Currently, the Korean Strategy was being played only against Australia, by the Asian Triumvirate —even Hunt had heard of it. Besides, Bunker's prediction bands said that the campaign would probably collapse after Australia joined the NRPA economic union.

In fact, however, the Korean Strategy indicators also changed under Nicholas's gaze: here, even a "long-term" strategy can mean an action lasting only a dozen or so days —after all, these are the Instant Economic Wars' "shake and bake."

Of course, national banks tried to defend their countries' economies by ordering defense programs to buy up all large blocks of key shares thrown onto the market and similarly maintaining currency and treasury bond rates, but even within the framework of these simplest strategies they could be defeated by an opponent with larger cash reserves (especially when it comes to large-issue debt securities from the top of the pyramid). This is one of the reasons for the tendency to join economic defense alliances, especially when it comes to less wealthy countries.

In the States and NAFTA, similar actions were within the competence of the Economic Defense Corps, for which purpose it was created. Its military potential currently oscillated around one hundred teradollars, or at least that is what Hunt heard speculations in the media. Effective long-term counteroffensives are very difficult, however, and it has been said for a long time that the EDC is no longer enough.

Threatened by devastating offensives, they usually resorted to creating gigantic holdings consolidating entire branches of industry of a country, or even a continent, into a single economic organism. If this concerned an area that was a pillar of the economies of these countries, the management of such a holding

became an analogue of the state government (or supra-state government) and accordingly gained in competence and importance. This was the case, for example, with the South American Timber Cartel. The inhabitants of the Amazon could speak of economic subordination rather than citizenship in the traditional sense of the word. Such cartels were rigid structures, designed to last for many years, while alliances of the first kind were loose and easy to break, and were in fact broken, reversed, and rebuilt almost constantly. This was primarily because the brokerage supercomputers introduced them into their considerations as yet another variable, and in an era when the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the heads of intelligence and counterintelligence were obligatory info-economists, governments showed a dangerous tendency to be influenced by the advice of these computers.

Nicholas looked around the interior of this Bunker II, trying in vain to overcome his disorientation. He tried to decipher from the analyses displayed around him into something that would support his intuitive suspicion that the failure of the EDC superprogram was not accidental (they should have written in plain text here), but there was not a word about WINNIE-THE-POOH anywhere. He even asked the Devil, who, in turn, asked the Bunker's programs (the question will be recorded), but in response he received basically only a maxim about the unpredictability of free market behavior, if not counting several gigas of detailed analyses in the attachment. Yes, the specificity of the IEW also included the fact that the field on which battles are fought is subject to constant, very rapid and profound changes, and the direction of these changes cannot be predicted in any way: it is a chaotic process, what can be called. Among other things, this put Hunt off infoeconomics: it is not a profession, not a career, but rather a kind of vocation, requiring absolute devotion. The average useful life of EDC soldiers on the front line was five months.

Because it's not just the Wars. The situation was further complicated by the fact that literally anyone could join these struggles. Didn't Hunt himself speculate on the game? In one way or another, everyone did it, directly and indirectly, even if they were unaware of it. It is true that a single private investor does not represent any force, but tens of millions of them —tens, hundreds of millions of "stock exchange bandits" who invest and realize profits from their home terminals between lunch and dinner, without any deeper analysis, "on the nose" —this is already a very significant factor that cannot be ignored and which cannot be fully analyzed and simulated by any, no matter how extensive, complicated and experienced, computer cellular networks. He often heard from

his info-economist friends how wonderful it would be if all the stock exchange plankton suddenly went to hell and only sharks and whales remained in the oceans: finally we would see what was going on here a little more clearly.

But there were also a lot of cetaceans in those waters. No country can "refuse" to participate in Economic Wars, adopt the position of an "economic pacifist" or a forced neutral, threatening to retaliate using traditional means—because in this way, at best, it will condemn itself to isolation, which is tantamount to a regression to a nineteenth-century economy, the necessity of export substitution, a bloody smuggling war, and invariably ends in mass emigration and the flight of capital, the rapid pauperization of society, a change of government, and the takeover of the country for next to nothing by patient competitors.

Well, if Kleist is to be believed, that's what awaits us anyway.

He touched the soldier's face. It was puffed out at him from all sides.

"Am I interrupting? I'd like to ask you something."

"I'm listening, sir," the soldier said. He didn't get up, though. (That's good, Hunt thought. I'd probably throw up.)

"Can you tell me when exactly you started to become aware of, um, POOH's aberrations?"

"The first alarm went off the day before yesterday at five sixteen in the afternoon, NYT."

So the theory of Langolian's premeditated action fell through. They wouldn't have made it in time for anything. But did that automatically mean that Chigu-eza was telling the truth? He could feel that she was lying; there, at the airport, he could feel it through his skin (through his mind) with every word she said more clearly: she was lying a lot, about Toulouse, and perhaps about others as well.

"Thanks."

The soldier didn't even nod. He had probably been working in multitasking mode the whole time, with the manager's personality script taking care of it.

"The general is inviting you," the Devil suddenly said.

Nicholas reached out to him. Lucifer led him out from under the layers of OVR. Returning to the 3D world was also a bit of a shock. He used his cane to support himself as he climbed back onto the gallery.

Kleist received him with all the official rituals. True, they were outside NEti, but under the Bunker's internal network. On the other hand, was that infirmary exempt from it? Adjusting the lace of his cuffs, he calculated the levels of desperation.

The ostentatiously ascetic decor of the room (two armchairs, a bare table, she had the rest in OVR for sure) and the general's gray field uniform discouraged any verbal ornamentation.

"This program of yours..." Hunt began after a few minutes. "The one who went crazy..."

"Not ours," she snapped.

"Never mind. Did his fixation come to light early enough for them to have time to prepare the production and distribution of the Toulouse mold? What do you think, General?"

He realized that he was reflexively twisting his lips into a slight half-smile and immediately returned to a completely neutral expression. But Kleist had already seen her own and was now looking at him suspiciously, absently running her thumb along the edge of the table.

"I don't want to take part in this," she said.

"In what?"

"In your games. Goodbye, Mr. Hunt."

He didn't get up. With his sixth finger, he nodded at Lucifer and a smoky mirror unfolded under the ceiling, displaying Hunt's notes, written hastily in the car on the way to the Bunker, in Gothic script. He glanced over them quickly and nodded at Lucifer again.

"I won't ask how, how much, and since when you knew about this cutting and Fungus, because you won't tell me anyway," he said, telling the Orator to modulate his voice appropriately. "But please consider this: if all decision-

makers around the world now cover themselves with Toulouse 10 —what will be the next move of the monadic powers to regain their lost advantage?”

“Are you insinuating something, Mr. Hunt? If you know something, please tell me clearly.”

Of course, the whole point was that he knew nothing. He guessed based on other people’s guesses and sought confirmation for these guesses. Kleist, perhaps, guessed something too —if she had heard about Fungus, she had some sources of her own. (Exactly —what? Check! Subtly: you can’t send a sneaker here). But there was no way to ask her about these guesses directly. What could he do: throw out such bait. Carefully, carefully —because any excessive literalness could cost him dearly.

“Change the subject,” the Devil whispered in his left ear.

He changed it.

“How’s the market? Have we got the situation under control yet?”

She waited a moment before answering. She was probably checking OVR (was her working MUI also five-dimensional?), although he didn’t notice the change in the focus of her gaze.

“We’ve taken back control of the operational funds. We’ve deleted the unreliable programs, killed the infected networks. The losses are high, but there’s also a lot of confusion in general. It’ll take a few days for the world to balance out, and then we’ll see where we stand. Tomorrow we’ll see on the stock exchanges how the metatrends are set. I can say this much for sure: the lead time has increased by a dozen or so hours.”

“What?”

“Minimal delay in the reaction of uninvolved investors.”

“Now bring it back,” the Devil whispered.

“If you ever hear of another such Fungus, please don’t hesitate. I’m at your disposal.”

He saw a glint of understanding in her eyes.

"It wasn't Bronstein who told me," she drawled.

"Yes?"

"Yes, yes, yes. You can forget it," she snorted. "I thought that it's illogical, after all, who consciously seeks self-destruction, after all, it's madness. But I see that for you it's no catastrophe, that it means nothing, because you don't identify with any country. You've never taken an oath, you've never worn a uniform, no flag and no land is yours. Who have you received offers from? How high are they? Goodbye, Mr. Hunt. Get the fuck out of my sight."

Then, as he was going down to minus seven to give his closing speech, Hunt rewound the moment of her reaction several times and understood what that flash meant. General Kleist believed that Nicholas was responsible for Bronstein's death and, perhaps, for the sudden revelation of Toulouse 10; that by revealing her knowledge to Nicholas —back then, in the infirmary —she had inadvertently provoked him to make such drastic decisions.

So she should be grateful to him: after all, she got what she wanted.

He started laughing, but then he froze. After all, Kleist reasoned completely logically, she had all the data to reach such conclusions. Her guesses were just as valid as Hunt's.

After all, he himself was not entirely convinced that it was not because of him (or rather: thanks to him) that Toulouse 10 with this whole Fungus program had been brought out of the treasury of a private monopoly into the light of day. On the one hand: it was hard for him to believe that he had reversed the history of the world from Bronstein's bathroom with the help of a few phone calls. On the other hand: he was even worse at believing in such accidental coincidences as Bronstein on a belt and the failure of the EDC computers.

So? He believed both versions and believed neither; the function had not yet reduced itself and had to operate on the basis of absurd superpositions, as Major Fuzz would say. That's just how it is. Not houses of cards —but palaces of soap bubbles.

BECAUSE he spent more time bowing, exchanging business cards, shaking hands and reciting NEti formulas than he had expected, and then, when

the limousines had already taken the conference participants to the airports, Hunt was caught by McFly, Fortzhauser and Moore, along with Schatz, and forced him to make a dozen or so decisions on the spot —because of the above, he was over an hour late for his scheduled meeting with Sneaky Fucker.

This was the last moment to withdraw, the last chance for fear. Once he sets the sneaker on Chigueza —he will not be able to deny such unequivocal actions and erase or falsify the traces left behind. Even the most brilliant sneaker is not brilliant enough to avoid all security measures and not be tracked down *post factum*. Hunt himself destroyed several people during his Real Life who had sent sneakers after him, one of them probably even took a Kevorkian afterwards.

Maybe Nicholas would have backed out, if not for the delay, because the pressure of rushing left him no room for any higher reflections.

Sneaky Fucker lived in one of the gated districts of the distant suburbs of New York, the numerous "tax enclaves" in the suburbs of megapolises. Nicholas had already been checked inside by two private police stations and one intelligent gate. The gate in the enclave wall resembled a medieval fortification, you drove into the darkness uncertain whether you would see the sun again: if any potential threats were scanned, a "bollard" hidden in the ground would rip the car open like a cardboard box. Beyond the gate was a different world. In some cultural enclaves, a different language was even used.

This is where the top one percent lived, generating three-quarters of the global income. However —Hunt would bet on it —not a cent of the sky-high profits of the enclave residents would go to the budgets of the US, Canada or the EU. The same government guarantees and the wealth of existing infrastructure that made these countries such attractive places for the wealthiest to settle were an indirect reason why they moved their companies (legally and/or physically) to much more fiscally advantageous environments. This is nothing more complicated than the principle of communicating vessels or the law of gas diffusion. Therefore, year by year, an increasing part of the budget came from indirect, consumption taxes; direct taxes (income, investment, even cadastral) resisted all legal enforcement. Indirect taxes were getting worse since the cheapening of solar nanofabrics and portable megabatteries; when the latter enter mass production, oil will finally fall on its head. The stock market knew about it for a long time, the last remains of the former OPEC figureheads have already been buried, oil companies have been biting the infoeconomic soil for two years. Here

everything is mixed with everything else, the chains of cause and effect are lopped, it is impossible to indicate the beginning or end of the process: after all, it is precisely because of the drastic drop in oil prices (and all its consequences) that the "top percent" of Saudi Arabian society is now immigrating to the EU and NAFTA enclaves, the financial elites of the Orient are fleeing from under the horizon of the economic black hole —along the lines of least fiscal resistance, along the gradients of cheap luxury —to us. Taste the decadence of Rome while there is still time —Hunt grimaced in silence, unable to forget the words of the phenomenon from Anselm's scan.

Over a hundred thousand Chinese lived in a famous strip of Californian enclaves. Why not, since they could afford it, and they were not taking jobs from Americans? It was a way to use the best features of both countries, while omitting the bad ones. Who could then say what nationality or citizenship the enclavists really were? Even they —apart from the most recent immigrants or signatories of isolationist agreements —were not sure.

Nicholas drove slowly along the wide avenues (the gate imposed a 15 mph speed limit on the car's computer), passing cyclists and passers-by. The sculpture of their bodies told him nothing about their origins, but from the colorful clothing he could deduce their native cultural zones. He even noticed a few veiled women. It was a purely commercial enclave, funded by one of the juridictors.

Sneaky Fucker's house was no different from the row of similar, squat, asymmetrically planned villas, partially hidden by the lush greenery of surrounding gardens. This was where he lived and ran his research company. From what Hunt knew, Sneaky Fucker employed over a hundred people on participatory contracts, but they all worked in their own homes, and the company as a company existed only in the conventional reality of economic constructs. He didn't even know under whose law it had been registered. Small children were running around the house, a very ugly bulldog was chasing a girl on a wobbly bike between the trees, a woman was shouting from the veranda. Sneaky Fucker's name was Marius Hedge, a vulgar nickname he had received from his student days, he didn't have it embossed on his business cards, but it was useful to him as an important element of the advertising myth (a sticky meme). He was well-known in the circles he cared about. Hunt knew that Senator Tito had also benefited from Hedge's exceptional skills from Imelda. You don't advertise a certain type of research service in the sky or on the sides of airships.

The estate was covered by OVR, and Nicholas was taken to Sneaky Fucker by a distinguished butler with lush ginger whiskers and a British accent (from Hunt's Necropolis he had a horned shadow and a demonic gaze). The elegance of the program also lay in the fact that the servant didn't disappear into thin air, but simply walked into the home.

Hedge was watering strangely shaped plants unknown to Nicholas in the garden.

"My designs," he boasted, pointing them out to Hunt with a yellow watering can. "This one here will bloom in colors dependent on the colors of the neighbors. Sow a large meadow and after a few generations we'll have beautiful fractals, all we have to do is play a bit with the individual acidity parameters. I've already patented that."

"I'm so sorry, but I really couldn't, I called to say I was stuck..."

"Never mind. This one —do you see? A fireworks tree, a little forest for the Fourth of July... What's this about?"

"Here?"

"Why not? Where my brain is, there's my office."

Hedge was carved into a Latino, but he had clearly grown a bit taller from this homely lifestyle, growing a paunch, a beard, and jovial manners: a middle-aged hacker (no pensions for amateurs).

Panting, he now herded Nicholas toward the garden gazebo. Here, on the table, next to a basket of some coal-black fruit, an even darker cat was sleeping. It was already evening, and even without the Necropolis overlay, the shadows were long and damp. They entered the gazebo and sank into the drinking twilight.

Lucifer whispered a request for authorization to Hunt. Hunt nodded in agreement with his sixth finger.

"Here you go," the sneaker muttered, wiping his hands on the legs of his gardening trousers in an absurd reflex.

Lucifer handed him a white envelope over the cat. The sneaker put it in his pocket, then looked away for a moment.

“Any political context?” he asked.

“They had a stake in Bronstein’s career and support the president.”

“True, you were there. The juridictor let you through?”

“Are you kidding? The FBI would eat me in my shoes if I even mentioned it.”

“And me?”

“They won’t touch you, too many heads would roll along with mine, you know that.”

The sneaker thoughtfully picked up one of the ultra-black fruits and bit into it. It smelled of cinnamon, purple juice hissed.

“The prices of old prints have gone up a lot lately,” he said, wiping his beard.

That’s true,” Hunt replied slowly.

“I’ve been thinking... instead of a normal fee, I’d rather settle in a different way.”

“What?”

“Oh, one call to the home server would be enough. I’d like to know well in advance.”

“Hmm?”

“You know the rumors.”

“Never all of them.”

“There’s talk of a state of emergency, the mobilization of the Guard, and a freeze on stock market operations.”

“Are you crazy? That would destroy the entire presidential and congressional lobby, they’ll never decide to do that. Do you believe that?”

Hedge looked away, shrugged.

“Let’s say I’m an alarmist. If not, then no: you won’t call. But if you heard

earlier... Please call, for example, to ask about my flowers —I'll send you seeds. Okay?"

Hunt eyed Sneaky Fucker suspiciously. He even hung up the implant for a moment to get a clear look. Stepping back into the half-blind, he glanced at the host specification parchment.

"You didn't transfer from Hamaba?"

"Oh, well, somehow," Hedge mumbled, smiling uncertainly "I can't be sure. I'm too old to change now."

"Well," Nicholas sighed, getting up "I'll stop by tomorrow at this time. Will you make it?"

"You never know that in advance."

"Right. Thank you, the butler will see me off."

"Leon!"

"This way, sir."

AT Central, everyone somehow knew about Hunt's Washington adventures the day before yesterday. People he knew were almost complete strangers —Fortzhauser's bodyguards, for example, the doctors on duty on the subfloor —sent him knowing smiles. They probably wouldn't have dared to do that on NEti, but here everyone's reflexes and manners were coming undone. He locked himself in his office.

He had already been thinking about Senator Tito at Sneaky Fucker's and finally came to the conclusion that it wouldn't be out of the question to extract more details about December whispered around the Hill. Maybe confirm Nicholas's suspicions about the nature of the plague —would it really be a relative of September? Would it really cause —that, instead of infertility? He called, but it bounced off the priority barrier, once, twice, and a third time. So he called Imelda. What turned out: Gaspar was terribly angry with his brother-in-law, because he, knowing about Toulouse's imminent introduction, had played with him so vulgarly during Friday's conversation, coercing him into idiotic oaths,

haggling over things that were already worthless. What could Nicholas tell Imelda? Certainly not the truth, that is, that he had not really known anything about Toulouse at that time. "Well, I never liked him," he mumbled instead, straight into the purple of the symphonic sunset over the Cayman Islands. Indeed, he did not. Now he would have to show it even more clearly.

One of the EDC lieutenants, who had just finished his shift in the War monitoring center, entered Nicholas' office.

"You wanted to know if something..."

"What?"

"Actually, just a reason for further surprise," the lieutenant grimaced.

"Well, tell me, since you've already decided to bother me!" Nicholas snapped at him, who sometimes had no patience for safety rituals characteristic of weather forecasters from all ages and technologies.

"South Asian stock exchange bandits, sir."

"What about them?"

"The Bunker's analyses show a breakout of one of the CG components, they are playing on invisible fronts there, at least in part, the Chinese."

"For God's sake, in human words!"

"You see, stock exchange bandits usually get lost in the noise. Well, sometimes they contribute to some super-clear trend, then they come out as a component. The average horizon of realizing their profits is always one session. They do not use any common strategy in particular, everyone plays for themselves, cooperation is by definition impossible here."

"Well? What do you get differently?"

"In part," the EDC officer repeated cautiously. "Our expert programs show that their moves are beyond chaotic, they form a certain pattern characteristic of a quick opening in the Bengal Weekly Strategy, and they are playing against China. That is: statistically; because not all of them are. It is simply that a significant part of their transactions in the analysis is not explained by the horizon of realizing their profits and one vector stands out slightly above the

others.”

“Fine, fine, thank you for telling me about it —but what does it actually mean?”

The lieutenant almost snorted.

“It means nothing, these are the Economic Wars, sir, the Dow Jones is the Dow Jones, the rate is the rate.”

“I am asking for an interpretation. For the cause.”

“The causes are none of our business, we do not decide on politics, sir. However, it is still too early for an interpretation: it may be the Bengal Weekly, but it may also be something else. Sir.”

Hunt stared at the officer for a long moment, then waved his cane and the lieutenant left.

They are intelligent people, Nicholas shook his head, but so limited. They cannot reach beyond their world of meta-exchange with their thoughts or language. They have new axioms, also expressed in dense info-economics. This is what distinguishes it from classical economics: it does not refer to the real economic situation (and what exactly is this “real economic situation?”), nor to indicators derived directly from the physical world. Infoeconomists deal exclusively with the superstructure: the ent derivatives of basic relations. The facts subject to analysis in this almost hermetic world are quotations, rates, indices, their changes, trends in their changes, correlates and changes of trends, metatrends...

Compared to them, Schatz is truly a pure genius.

Maybe the lieutenant was simply tired after his shift, he answered based on the first associations, he did not think...

Schatz! I signed something for him, there, in the Bunker!

He looked into Ronald’s windowless cubicle, but he did not find him. Lucifer led Nicholas downstairs, to a room that had been empty until then. Now military technicians were bringing in barrel-shaped frames for drums of computational crystals —Hunt he recognized them at first glance, because such shelves covered the walls of almost every room in the NSA offices, where Nicholas had supervised

the mapping of the American Genome a year ago.

Schatz was talking to two sculpted civilians in the corridor. At the sight of Nicholas, he literally pushed them into the room, and he himself jumped up to Hunt, grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him toward the mini-cafe located behind the sarcophagus room with a broad smile. It was such an impudent violation of NEti that Nicholas did not have time to find a form of appropriate protest and with this involuntary silence he somehow consented to this physical rape. Public physical intercourse with another human being was depressing him to such a degree that he could not fully concentrate on either Ronald's words or what the Devil/consigliere was whispering to him: namely that he could activate the AV scan at any moment and that the juridictor was watching twenty-four hours a day.

"We finally started with this junk, we'll make it through the night," Schatz pontificated. "Four fifteens should be enough for a start, we'll start from the present day and work our way back, year by year. First we'll sift out the strongly motivated things, the iron chains of causality, subtrends, and all those processes whose beginning can be clearly indicated; because what we're looking for begins indistinctly, in hundreds, thousands of points at once, from the fog, delicately, growing, from synergistic mutations of neighboring sequences... Coffee? What? Shall we have a coffee? ...Jennis, this is a doctor of memetics from Berkeley, the black one, he has a theory about the popularity of individual drugs, maybe here we'll be able to go below the level of sensitivity to Nefele, here we can find correlations with weaker, more distant sources, drug addicts are very susceptible, some of them anyway, there are such substances that... You don't sweeten? ...Yes, sectarians and junkies by the way, but I have to recruit someone to whittle down the network for the culture sphere, music, film, aesthetics, I for one do not believe that there is nothing alien in this whole barrel, how can you even be delighted with it. Well, you see, this is precisely such slippery ground, quantified subjectivisms. Hence the need to return to the only objective basis for verification in memetics, we will bite it namely through economic rebounds. Machines will grind and point out extremes, jumps beyond the norm. Well, but here we need subtle methods of analysis, Chen is not bad, but I hope you will make the colonel and let me have Le Raph, he is the one who made the trees of humor conventions at Harvard. Because otherwise..."

"I'm sorry."

He somehow freed himself from the morbidly enthusiastic Ronald and fled to his own place. He did not understand Schatz at all. When he first appeared on the Team, he was a model example of a young, ambitious brainiac. When Hunt heard about Ronald's complaints, he wasn't surprised at all: he knew Schatz like that, he had managed to get to know hundreds of them over the years. Now —what? Had this Nefe thing gone to his brain? Did he expect this discovery to turn him into another Krasnov? Maybe he had sold the thing to someone behind the Team's back. To his protectors from Defense...? But no: he had announced it to everyone at a conference in the Bunker. There was no logic in it.

He didn't really understand himself either. Why hadn't he just gotten out of Ronald's grip? Why had he bothered to see him personally —couldn't he have called? Or even talked to him through an implant? After all, Schatz had an implant, maybe he had already exchanged it for Toulouse, the Team's members had received injection capsules from the FBI/EDC distributor, as the most vulnerable to monadic assaults. So he could. But he didn't even think. He went, and the stupid Devil was still leading him.

Having closed the office door behind him, he began to hit Lucifer on his horned head with his cane.

"Think! Think, you idiot!" he hissed (to himself, since there was no one else here).

"Aaaarr!" roared the prince of hell, taking the undeserved beating (the cane had silver fittings).

Then he disappeared. Nicholas sank into an armchair with a sigh.

He was given all of half a minute of this peace. A high-priority woman from the State Department had broken through the secretary's office. Puffing smoke, the Devil announced an emergency conference with legal experts from the Departments of Justice, Health, Defense, State, the FBI, and two Supreme Court justices —on the threats posed by the widespread use of Toulouse 10. The conference was held in 2D on LED screens, but Nicholas's implant converted it to OVR. This required Hunt's office to be tripled in size, and the number of participants exceeded two dozen. The whole thing was archived as an internal document, and the NETi formalities alone took half an hour. Before the conference call was over, night was already spreading outside, New York City was enveloped in feathery darkness.

Of course, they did not reach any consensus and did not establish anything, let alone make any specific decisions, because they did not even have the appropriate prerogatives for that. They only agreed on the fact that these threats exist —because indeed: the mere dissemination of Mad Drivers could lead to great tragedies. The inductive functions of Toulouse 10? Viruses? Remote mastering? Pirated editing? De facto incapacitation. It is true that it is impossible to break in, but there will always be some gullible fools who will voluntarily provide the access code to their Toulouse —and how will you then reverse the suspicion once a person has been broken into?

Besides, technological fashions cannot be stopped, the fractal of progress will not stop at the will of the law. It would have come in one way or another, regardless of the Monads, regardless of everything —from Asia, from the corporate enclaves of South America, from the authoritarian economic alliances of Africa. Let's at least try to maintain the age barrier: 18 years. That's what the law says. But even on this point no one had any doubts: outside NEti it would spread without any restrictions.

Hunt's Secretary had held over a dozen phone calls until the end of the conference, now Nicholas had to deal with them too. An Esteper had been installed in LabielS. The CIA reported that their Estepers had followed the trail of depressive monads to Hanoi itself. (These depressive monads were supposedly responsible for the suicidal decisions of the heads of the Twelve Companies, or so the Agency's analysts thought.) McManamara, skillfully coupled with several depressing trends, had fallen from the firmament and was now trying to induce revanchist trends —Flak was making fun of juvenilia who never learn from the mistakes of their predecessors, having belatedly realized his tactlessness; Hunt dryly ended the conversation with him. Moore called too, concerned because he had heard rumors of an outside investigation into the original leak of information about the Monads, the leak that everyone suspected the Team of. Had Hunt heard anything about it? Hunt hadn't. He had no idea whose work it could be; he had had enough potential vigilantes to confuse his enemies.

They also called from the *Curtwaiter*. They asked for permission to go into international waters. That the Estepers were still lost in the noise. He blamed Fortzhauser for making this decision. He also learned that Marina Vassone had reappeared on the horizon.

Her phone was already working. The secretary answered, then she herself.

The whole thing was in audio.

“You didn’t use the free Toulouse? Why?”

“A-ah, I don’t know, I’m not convinced.”

“I thought you would be the first...”

“I doubt I’m on their lists, I have no real power.”

“Nevertheless, you shouldn’t turn off your phone, the colonel was already trying to get the spooks back on their feet.”

“I had to take care of something, I didn’t want them to drag me across the country.”

So she was going somewhere. Without a phone, without using a cashchip, not leaving contacts.

“You should be a bit more careful, they’ll most likely come after us now, sniffing around for this imaginary leak, no need to make yourself a scapegoat.”

“Don’t overdo it, it’ll get to the bones.”

“Where are you? I’ve booked a table for tomorrow at ”De Aunche”...”

“Sorry. I won’t have time tomorrow.”

“Will you drop by the Central? On the ship?”

“Sorry. I don’t feel well.”

She hung up.

As he left the office, he wondered if he had correctly interpreted this refusal as a signal discouraging any further unofficial contacts. Perhaps now it was his turn to send a matchmaker, and to ask her if she wanted to continue the relationship. Because —here he almost banged his stick against the wall —he really wanted to keep it going, he really missed Marina’s eyes, her hands, the way she tilted her head back slightly, lost in thought, half-smiling... Oh, go away, you unclean force!

The night was deep, doubly under Necropolis. The corridors were even emp-

tier than usual, this silence could be bottled and sold as a sonic distillate of loneliness. He went down to Schatz's computer room (did I really sign a permit for all this?), but even that was locked tight.

Turning around, he noticed the door to the vestibule of the sarcophagus hall not closed. Immediately a lightning bolt of associations went across the surface of his thoughts: the sarcophagi —half-corpses —telepaths —Black —Black's face. He quickly moved toward the elevators.

But even as he fell into the garages, he was still firmly stuck in the web of these associations. Black, his hunger for solitude, his universal disgust, his paranoia. Whole sentences kept coming back to Hunt. From Black's diary? From his conversations with him? He couldn't even remember the sources. What was it? Remorse? In the car he thought about a psychoanalyst —but he preferred not to bring it to the surface, not to perpetuate his weakness. It would pass, it would pass, it would fade away.

Despite everything, he fell asleep before he got home. He had somehow forgotten about December and Sneaky Fuck. He was so tired, Lucifer had to shake him three times.

Fission

IN the morning, a courier package arrived directly to Nicholas Hunt's home address. The Devil informed him of this right after he uttered the quote of the day.

"Don't expect much from the end of the world. There's a package waiting at the Porter's."

"Let them bring it up," Hunt mumbled, crawling sluggishly toward the edge of the bed. He dreamed of Earth, he dreamed of looking at it from a bird's eye view of the void. But it wasn't an ordinary dream of flying, although he still remembered its weightlessness. He dreamed of reaching out and touching the planet, and then the globe, immersed in painfully bright blues, whites and yellows, exploded in his face. Such was his dream.

He was surprised by the intensity of the light streaming into the bedroom from the windows, all the more so when he remembered Necropolis. He looked at the OVR timer: noon. Had he messed with the implant settings again? Why hadn't Lucifer woken him up? How many calls were already waiting for him...? He would have cursed, if there was anyone to curse at.

Finally getting out of bed, he tottered to the hallway and took the package. It was a square package, a white cardboard box with courier post prints, almost entirely fitting in the palm of his hand, very light. He shook it —something rattled. He looked at it from all sides, but the sender field was left blank and nowhere could he see any clue as to its identity. He didn't think that post offices even accepted such packages.

Lucifer, uninvited, gave a long tirade about the need for strict adherence to security rules and the dangers associated with Nicholas's function. (Sometimes Hunt had doubts about how much such an implant manager was really able to understand about the owner's life, but sometimes he suspected the hand of a tough AI.) The Devil even went so far as to connect with the juridictor. Nicholas kicked him away, almost falling over in the process.

He opened the box with a fruit knife. Nothing exploded. If he had released any viruses targeted at him, they were not super-virulent, because he was still alive.

Inside were two company disks, two injection capsules, a small cube of gray, plastic-like material, an unpaired leather glove (for the left hand), and a roll of white string. A handwritten inscription ran across one of the disks in purple marker: PRAYER. The capsules were black, with the bright red letters FS clearly visible on the black.

Hunt walked over to a terminal built into the wall and inserted both disks into the drives. The implant visualized their contents classically: in 2D, in two parallel columns. Each disk occupied a single, long file (97% and 72%). The manager was unable to recognize their types, suggesting the use of public code-breaking keys. They were certainly not standalone executables, and they didn't work with any browsers, and the direct preview showed unorganized hexadecimal garbage. The save of both files was dated 17:43:19 yesterday evening—but that meant less than nothing, because what could be easier than changing the clock?

He took out the disks and threw them on the table. He picked up the capsules. He knew what they were, or at least he had strong suspicions. A Krasnov futuroscope. Who would send it to Hunt and why?

Well, only one person came to Nicholas's mind: Preslawny. Now, when he took a second look at the inscription on the disk, it seemed to him that he recognized Anselm's hand. The implant also had a handy graphological analyzer in its memory—unfortunately, Hunt had no comparative material. Or even if he had. For every program, there was a counterprogram: there were such specialized motion editors on Toulouse 10 that allowed for the forging of any handwriting with great precision. The differences would only come out with a micrometric analysis, since the shape of the hand, the length of the fingers, the build of the body—these things cannot be changed by any program. But a graphological application looking through human eyes would be of no use here.

Why the hell hadn't Anselm included any notes? First of all: why hadn't he called?

Tossing the gray cube in his hand, he ordered the Devil to call Preslawny on the highest priority code. No signal. The device was off or broken.

This of course aroused Hunt's suspicions. He felt the same shiver as he had in Watergate when he had seen the triangle of light shining under Bronstein's door. He had chided himself in the same way at first: this wasn't a movie. Maybe Anselm had simply turned off his phone, as Vassone had done. (Although neither of them should have done that without leaving a message on the operator's server.)

He hurriedly settled the outstanding calls as he dressed (he put the contents of the package in his jacket pocket), and then in the elevator, and as he was already on his way to Cygnus Tower. It was the Monday of the breakthrough, the Monday of the New Balance in the Wars, the Monday of the revelation. They were calling from the Bunker, from Moore, from Stimmel. Oiol was on the constant high-priority line, and who had not left the operational OVR since the opening of the eastern stock exchanges, where Hunt had visited him from the inside of his BMW. There he met, among others, Kleist and Radick doubles, and the directly blinded Secretary of Defense himself. Everyone had clearly already taken advantage of the benefits of Toulouse 10. Nicholas entered the OVR of the black crystals for the first time and was struck by the crowds and chaos reigning at government intersections (Microsoft won the software contract for federal institutions). He had to wait several seconds when entering closed private channels. While in multimedia visualizations, the transfer of updating data was interrupted, the implant could not keep up with smoothing the A and V lines. Nicholas prudently did not attach the other senses, preferring not to risk any physiological sensations today.

"Look at these flows...!" The surreal Oiol pointed to him with a finger with a diabolically long nail in burning curves. The fancy software blinded him with the film-like brightness of the visualizations.

Hunt listened, nodded, worried and marveled appropriately. He tried to survive all this with the least damage to his mental health. For as long as he could remember, he had lived either on the eve of a crisis or in the post-crisis period. All the predictions, hysteria and appeals had invariably turned out to be exaggerated—he saw no reason why this particular crisis should be so different

from the dozens of crises he had survived so far. On every occasion, they said: "After that, nothing will be the same." Indeed, it wasn't —because no day is ever the same as the day before it. But the fact that the world is constantly changing was no reason for Nicholas Hunt to be suddenly afraid. He readily agreed that with such an attitude, he could easily ignore real dangers —but how was he supposed to know which ones they were? Statistics encouraged the opposite approach. After all, specialists caw every time (now Kleist, before there were others, just as convincing, or even more so), and he, not being a specialist himself —how could he make a correct judgment? They caw, the world moves forward, one has to maintain common sense somehow.

At Central, he immediately ran into four FBI agents who were supposed to be dealing with "counterintelligence analysis." This was the "external investigation." Moore had already assigned them rooms (the unused space on the mezzanine was running out), and Hunt had silently assigned their departments. He had checked on them again later. They were gorging themselves on Chinese food in McFly's company. He wanted to find out the direction of their investigation, but one after another, with their mouths full and their faces very sincere, they began to assure him that they knew nothing yet, that they had yet to familiarize themselves with the materials, that it would take a long time, that they would keep him informed, etc. He almost believed them.

Hunt had been called several times throughout the day from the New York office of A&S Justice Incorporated. The juridictor's lawyers had still not been able to remove Nicholas from the Bronstein case, the prosecutor was seeking to cross-examine Hunt, and the A&S people were advising at least to agree to a supervised session, the day after tomorrow, in New York, at the juridictor's offices or at Hetter's monastery, if arbitration was accepted. Nicholas was determined to close the case at all costs. If, God forbid, something went wrong, Langolian could easily drown him in this shit: Hunt would not have looked back before all the networks would have announced him—in subtle but unpunishable insinuations—as Bronstein's murderer.

He remembered the mysterious package. First, he stopped by Moore's and gave him the gray cube, the string, and the glove, to investigate what it was. Someone else would probably have widened his eyes at such a dictum, but Moore only scratched his nose and muttered that Nicholas's private requests always resulted in interesting discoveries. This reminded Hunt of Schatz's project. He even went there, but immediately fled this nest of madmen: exomemeticists

argued about the extraterrestrial origins of the individual elements of modern dances.

Time and again Nicholas was summoned to the War monitoring center. He didn't feel like leaving his office anymore, so he just connected to the center's machines. The scabby EDC captain explained to Hunt the enormity of individual disasters from the inside of a dark mirror. Each time he tried to explain, because Nicholas only got the impression that the Corps officer was brazenly listing to him the next areas of his ignorance. All he remembered from this was that the incomprehensible conspiracy of retail players had spread throughout Asia, and the great movements of capital had indicated—in addition to the Hong Kong Company—other potential monadic powers: the Transvaal, the Trans-Caucasus, Israel. In addition, everyone expected counterattacks by defense programs of absorbed countries/corporations, each with a force at least equal to the force of the recent attack by the perverted EDC program. This would soon accumulate on the world stock exchanges and then even the largest financial reserves would not be enough for insurance. In the meantime, almost all indicators correlated with the American economy were falling, maybe not alarmingly fast, but persistently. It was a Monday of an obvious bear market. Hunt imagined what was happening in the OVR of Oiol's black crystals.

He began to translate the post-conference minutes into the language of bureaucratic directives with all the more attention. As Nicholas had predicted, there were several dozen terabytes of them, the conclusions closing the deliberations of each group alone took up a total of six megabytes of unformatted print. And—also in accordance with his predictions—they proposed so many mutually contradictory strategies that Hunt could be calm about the justification of all his decisions, past and future.

He copied all the data into his implant and continued working in a semi-blind A-V. Coming across Krasnov speaking in one of the recordings, he remembered Anselm and chased Lucifer away. Unfortunately: Preslawny's phone still didn't give a return signal. Irritated, he called the head of staff at the Hacienda directly.

"He hasn't come back yet," the other replied.

"He left? When and where?"

"To the city, I guess, because where else could he have gone? Last night. Yes. It was already dark. He must have been partying."

“His phone isn’t answering.”

“Are you suggesting we send someone after him? You know best what procedures you have there. Just ping me if something shows up.”

“‘Something,’ huh? Okay, you’re welcome.”

Half an hour later, Fortzhauser called Hunt, with more complaints about Vassone: that they were supposedly harassing him from *Curtwaiter* because the doctor hadn’t deigned to show up again, had turned off her phone and was somewhere in the clouds. This sudden plague of disconnecting stirred up bad associations in Nicholas. By the way —Vassone really did stupidly provoke suspicions.

Another half an hour —and the Devil reminded him of the meeting with Sneaky Fucker. It’s time, it’s time. Hunt was pulling into the garages with McFly and one of the special agents, the two of them were telling each other macabre jokes straight from the morgue, somehow completely unfunny to Nicholas.

The drive to the sneaker’s house took much longer than yesterday: the suburban areas were exceptionally congested, the car’s pilot programs couldn’t cope. He saw the cause of one of the hold-ups with his own eyes: on the ribbon below, several passengers got out of their cars and began to struggle, kick, punch each other, while Nicholas watched others join in. The helicopters of the traffic police and the judiciary circled overhead, like hairy dragonflies in Necropolis.

This time. Hedge asked Hunt to go inside and down to the basement of his villa, where the sneaker’s isolation ward was located. It was a small room decorated in a caricature of the Orient: bright carpets, piles of pillows, no chairs, no furniture at all. Honey —colored light emanated from the tin lamps placed in the four corners of the room. Somewhere, incense was burning, or at least Nicholas could smell it. Hedge pointed to one of the nests of pillows, and he himself settled comfortably on his side by the door. This time, he was in a large red dressing gown —only a fez on his head was missing to complete the image of a benevolent pasha just starting a bargain with the infidels.

From the moment the door slammed shut, the isolation was complete. Hunt was convinced of this after five unsuccessful attempts to connect the implant to the local stars. Probably a Faraday cage.

Sneaky Fucker reached into his shirt and pulled out a wildly writhing cobra from under the folds of red.

"My little program," he stroked its hood. "Lower your shields, Nicholas, I have to make sure you don't suddenly turn on a scan here." Without warning, he had changed to first name basis: you can't be more out of NEti than the two of them now.

Nicholas nodded at Lucifer.

"Okay," he muttered aloud.

The sneaker threw the cobra at him. The snake twisted in mid-air, fell on Hunt's chest and bit him through his clothes. Nicholas shook it off with one blow in disgust. The reptile quickly disappeared somewhere between the pillows.

"Well?" Hunt muttered, slightly irritated now. "So?"

Sneaky Fucker pointed his thumb at the wall on the left. The wall was lit up: now it showed the image of Chigueza walking down a long, empty corridor, facing a charnel house.

"Chigueza, Maria Vonda. Born in 1997 in Paris, France, to a French mother and a Mexican father. Pre-trevelyanist. Lawyer. Since '31, she has worked at Sementic, later a pillar of the Langolian Group. From '33, she began to take part in their shares. The scope of her duties was unclear until '52, when she briefly served as investment director. But then she was completely removed from the payroll. In the following years, after a series of mergers, she strengthened her position and increased her shares. However, specific data was increasingly difficult to obtain. At the time of the Langolian Group's establishment, she sold all of her shares and since then, there have been no official connections. She is taxed according to the Indian Buffer Tax, and it is impossible to assess the actual size of her income and assets. I have traced the paths of the Group's larger shareholdings, and based on this data and my professional experience, I would hazard a guess that Chigueza controls between twenty and forty-five percent of the shares. Maybe even more. It is difficult to judge, since the virtual owners were apparently selected through the brokerage firms.

"So she has a controlling interest?" Hunt muttered thoughtfully, absorbing this data with all the more concentration knowing that he would not have a

chance to repeat the lecture later on either from a scan or in a text transcript.

Chigueza's career from Trevelyanist to corporate owner did not impress him that much: such careers had happened too often to be a sensation. Power was first land, then capital, now intellectual power —and that meant people and the contents of their minds. However, truly valuable individuals can no longer be bound by emotional bonds (enforcing loyalty to the homeland/company), nor can they be retained by always outperforming the pay offered to them by the competition. The first to understand this were companies based entirely on intellectual potential: law firms, advisory and consulting offices, and the like. Their ownership structure changed radically in a short time —they transformed into a kind of cooperative, employee-owned companies, with shares in them only being available to employees above a certain high threshold of efficiency and in proportion to their potential. This system rapidly penetrated everywhere where intellectual abilities were of key importance —that is, to almost every sector of the economy. However, it still affected the managerial class the most, because here there was the most direct translation of the "value" of the hired mind into the amount of profits achieved. Up to a certain point, the size of Chigueza's shares therefore proved her importance to the company. Now, however, it said more about the importance of the company to Chigueza.

That Maria was taxed in one of the post-Indian zones —that didn't interest Nicholas either. When the basic product is information, and the means of its production are practically limited to people, and not large masses of workers, but small groups of specialists —then nothing ties companies to a specific country, and it is enough for the economic benefits resulting from the relocation to exceed the psychological discomfort caused by emigration, and the center of gravity of the world economy shifts. Yet this discomfort was getting smaller over time: you really have to try hard to find a place on Earth where a person would actually feel like an emigrant. In addition, the need for physical relocation affected a small percentage of employees, most of them did their work remotely anyway, a few operations on the crystals of the registration courts were enough to relocate the company to the other side of the world. If the Economic Wars hadn't resulted in the need to consolidate into defensive holdings and alliances, compact industry and territorial structures —VR should be considered the homeland of ninety percent of companies. Chigueza's Indian connections said nothing about her. Oh, she had good tax advisors.

"Practically, yes," Hedge replied to Nicholas' question. "The volume of Lan-

golian shares in free float is not that large, it is quite a dense network, they adopted an encapsulation strategy in the Wars.”

This is also nothing unusual. The share of democratic countries and corporations with a loose capital structure in the world GDP fell year by year in favor of ”closed,” ”encapsulated” companies. Such a structure simply paid off more.

“Another interesting fact about the company: ten years ago they had a lawsuit with one of the Bridge’s subcontractors at the Jesuits. Nothing went beyond the order, but we can assume that it was about the rights to the neuroconnection technology. The content of the Jesuits’ ruling itself is impossible to find out.”

Most disputes concerning civil contracts were resolved according to the attached simplified codes, exclusive to local law. If both parties agreed, instead of going to court, they went to the so-called ”judges of trust.” Usually, they were clergy of denominations with a long tradition, enjoying unquestionable authority. Companies chose this path, because it was profitable: it removed the monstrous, several dozen percent overhang of legal expenses, greatly expedited the entire procedure, and minimized the likelihood of bribery scandals.

“Now, please pay attention.”

The image on the wall changed: instead of a corridor, the interior of the airport concourse appeared. In a close-up, Hunt recognized himself and the jurda of the Washington branch of A&S. Nicholas was sitting alone at one of the tables, the jurda —at the table next to it.

“I can rewind it for you for an hour in both directions,” said Sneaky Fuck. “You were talking into an ashtray. Very professional work. I even checked to see if there was a gap in the crowd where she came from, but they fixed that too. More: whatever are you talking about you mumble, these are some dirty rhymes. Funny people.”

“What is this made of? Airport security nets?”

“Legal insurance.”

That got Nicholas going. This Sneaky Fuck is really good, since he steps so easily on NEti notary crystals.

It's obvious that all these security measures at the HQ aren't without reason.

"*Señora* Chigueza rarely visits the living world at all," Hedge continued. "Now I'll show you the dozen or so clips I managed to dig up from the last year, most of which are from public saves of scans of random passers-by anyway, because you won't find anything on NEti."

In total, it was a little over seven minutes. Chigneza flashed on the wall of Hedge's isolation ward against the background of various landscapes, inside various buildings, alone and in company, in a crowd, on the street, from behind, from the front, from profile, from above, in reflections, in static shots and broken formats of dynamic POV. Sometimes, I managed to catch the words she was saying, then they would appear simultaneously in a separate window. Sentences without connection, about December. Nothing.

Hedge still didn't look at the wall, he was always looking at Hunt. If he was expecting some violent reactions, he was completely disappointed —Nicholas didn't blink, not a single muscle in his face twitched. When the presentation was over, he asked for it to be repeated. Again. "Any specific part?" asked Sneaky Fucker. But Hunt shook his head.

"Do you often come across such phantoms?"

"More often than you might think," gasped Hedge. "Property rights are a jungle. There are a few of those tycoons you see everywhere in the media, there are a few of those deeply rooted families —but then: a hole, a big hole between them and hired management. These billionaires born of the Wars, they don't identify with any community, they are one-man states, they cut themselves off from reality not out of snobbery or some vain paranoia, I don't think. More likely out of fear. Sometimes, instead of playing against the company, they played directly against its owner, and really hard, you probably remember Lanckfurst or the Michigan case. Now, of course, it's also more or less clear who's behind what. These are standard precautions, after all."

Then Nicholas asked about Bronstein.

"Nothing at all," the sneaker admitted honestly. "I couldn't delve too deeply, too much into the black crystals."

"I hope you didn't take excessive risks."

"No," Sneaky Fuckler laughed, "I didn't take excessive risks. Besides, how can you know? You don't get any warnings in this business. It's just that one day the sky falls on your head."

"December," Hunt opened another topic.

"Yes," the sneaker sighed, "that's where I had a problem. With such wide-open forks, I drowned under an avalanche of unrelated data, after all it's one of the most frequently used words. It's hard to create an accurate and effective filter. I won't list it for you, because you wouldn't understand it anyway. I had to limit myself to correlations with the entities you provided. I filtered out the banalities. If they were talking in code, some internal code —well, it's hard, it's impossible to tell from a few sentences thrown out on the street or in a restaurant. There were two files left.

A wooden cabin covered with a thick blanket of snow appeared on the wall, shaggy clouds of brightness bursting out of its open door into the night, the reflection from the white covering the ground created unpleasant contrasts for the eye with the dark depths of the forest and sky. The image lasted in a freeze frame. In the foreground were a man and a woman, both dressed surprisingly lightly for the default air temperature. The woman was leaning toward the ground, half-turned toward the man coming down the steps of the hut.

"This pheno-mongol works at Langolian, deputy head of the legal department. This is his wife on a four-year extended leave. The owner of the cabin evicted them. Please listen, I've turned up the audio."

The image moved. The woman, straightening up, threw a snowball at the man.

"Or maybe this December of yours, huh?! Shitty..."

"Shut up!!" the pheno-mongol shouted, ran up to her, knocked her down in the snow. They struggled for a moment. Finally, he pulled her to her feet and led her into the cabin.

"The second one," announced Sneaky Fuckler.

A motorway exit. The sun low over the prairie. Ferno ad. The Mercedes stops, two sculpted men get out. Stop.

“The brunette is Dr. Muchin, a genetic designer, first in government projects, under Vermundter, then briefly at SRTY Ltd., Langolian gives him eighty percent of his orders; now he’s a freelancer, on assignment. The second one is his husband, who’s been there for two years.

They got out, the Mercedes closed the door, they moved toward the camera.

”But after December, after December...” Muchin muttered.

“Don’t worry so much.”

“Because I know...”

“That’s exactly it.”

“Smeeboy never...”

“Er—there.”

“I’m telling you.”

“It’s not you. It’s a coincidence.”

“But prayer... Prayer will use it all, it’s billions, trillions, Jesus, I don’t know...”

“Come on, come on.”

They went out of frame.

“If there’s anything more,” Hedge declared, “at least I haven’t managed to dig it up.”

“When was that second piece recorded?”

“Er...last Tuesday.”

Hunt sat up on the pillows, reached into his pocket and tossed the two Anselm disks to the Sneaker.

“Would you kindly check what’s on them.”

Sneaky Fucker only raised an eyebrow slightly. He dug out a rounded box from under the cushions and stuffed the disks into it. Hunt, watching with a

straight face, belatedly realized that Hedge would almost certainly copy their entire contents.

"I don't know the format," the sneaker said slowly, looking somewhere above Nicholas's head. "By the looks of it, it's a compressed package, but what compressor, God knows. It doesn't have a head, it won't unwind itself. Where did you get that?"

"God knows," Hunt shrugged, reaching for the disks.

Sneaky Fucker handed them back to him.

"As for our settlement..." Nicholas began.

"My offer still stands."

"I really don't think so..."

"Don't worry," Hedge laughed, standing up. "Maybe I'm just playing Don Corleone, a favor here, a favor there."

Hunt nodded.

"In that case, I'll pay for this right away," he said, looking down at the sneaker reaching for the doorknob.

"For what?"

"People keep getting lost in my head, thinking that if they turn off their phones, they're free. I don't want to drag the internals into this, but they should know the rules. Could I set sieves on them? A day or two. Anselm Preslawny, Marina Vassone. I'll give you their numbers in a moment."

Hedge shrugged.

"No problem."

Hunt stood up, took the envelope from Lucifer and handed it to Sneaky Fucker. They shook hands in continuation of this movement. Smoke rose from the cashchip, the transaction data appeared, Nicholas confirmed.

Hedge personally escorted Hunt to the gate of the estate, to the car. Leon didn't even show up.

As soon as Nicholas left the isolation room, the names of the people waiting to be connected flashed in red neon. He himself kept trying to get through to Anselm and Marina's phones, but their names weren't on the list. On the way back to Cygnus Tower, he talked so much that he finally started to croak—Orator smoothed it out, but Hunt's throat was already raw.

Sipping BMW's signature tonic, he looked out the car window and was surprised to see that he still hadn't made it out of the suburban ring road zone, even though the sun had long since set. Advertisements blazed in the sky like announcements of the commercial apocalypse. Hunt leaned his head back, the armchair recognized the mood and embraced it more deeply. Mental fatigue was translating into material fatigue in Nicholas' body. As his muscles cooled, his pessimism grew. One of those calls was from his stock operator: Hunt had lost a good few kilobucks in the space of a few hours. "Should I come down?" The brokerage house program asked. "Should I come down?" Nicholas answered negatively, but only out of pure stubbornness.

Gloomy thoughts took hold of him. Even if he guessed December correctly—so what? Who could he sell it to? Sell it in exchange for a new life? He was afraid that this was one of those cases that primarily harmed those who revealed it. In the same way, he wouldn't resurrect himself by revealing some big bribery scandal—after the first two or three months, it would only push him even deeper into the twilight of the zombie world.

So why is he even putting himself in danger? I should have chickened out, I would have survived somehow, no worries, I've swallowed greater cowards. Now, however, I'm sinking deeper and deeper into absurd investigations, partly illegal to boot. If they come to Kleist, the general will make me the grey eminence of an imaginary conspiracy. A conspiracy, my God...! He would laugh—but what a laugh that would be.

Maybe I'd better get out of this Necropolis, why get even more depressed...

Another caller came in. Red letters: HEDGE.

"Yes?"

"Vassone, the door to her apartment, a minute ago, she came out or came in."

"Thank you."

Sighing, he called the driver and changed the destination. It will take a while before the car even moves to the exit lanes. Estimated time of arrival: 27 minutes.

In the end, it took almost twice as long. Hunt had managed to select, profile and test Baryshnikov, an amateur motion editor, during that time. He didn't want to show his tiredness to Marina, he wanted to be impudent, arrogant, filled with malicious energy.

In the hotel elevator, he looked at himself in the mirror and fixed his makeup. She went out —she went in: fifty-fifty. Walking toward her door, he tapped loudly with his cane. He closed the visualization of the telephone secretary, opened the recording of the full A-V scan.

She went out —she went in, she went out —she went in...

"What?" she snapped at him, the door barely opened. "What do you want?"

"Good evening," he bowed smoothly. Baryshnikov safely froze his face. "Greetings from Maria Chigueva."

She just looked at him. Now he looked at her with greater attention: her eyes were red, her hair was not combed. How she was dressed: in jeans and a dark turtleneck —She even hid her pendant with the juridicator's logo under it, she clearly wasn't going anywhere. Bowing, he noticed what she had on her feet: sports, ankle-high tauppies.

She stood in the doorway, blocking his way inside; if Hunt didn't back out quickly, he'd fall under several paragraphs with NEti.

"No?" she repeated, and he wondered if she wasn't using some Orator, she threw that single syllable in his face with such force; but no, she didn't have an implant, she told him that herself. "What?"

"So was it a complete coincidence that you stayed in the same hotel in Boston and ate at the same table? You were dipping your sleeve in sauce, right there. Chigueva was paying with an outside chip."

"Oh, my God, come in, please."

But when he entered, Marina disappeared from his sight behind the office door. She reappeared only to disappear into another part of the apartment. Her entire behavior indicated some nervous absent-mindedness. She must have been absent-minded, since she was indulging in religious invocations under the Net.

Baryshnikov led Nicholas to the sofa and sat him down freely on it. This time the balcony door was closed, Hunt couldn't hear the sounds of the city. He could only hear the echoes of Marina's distant bustle.

Out of curiosity, he checked —but no, her phone was still off.

December, he remembered —December and Asian stock market bandits... If those in the monitoring center... But since I guessed... or rather —if they really guessed, because maybe...

Suddenly, for some unknown reason, Baryshnikov picked him up and jumped him over the sofa, cowering against the wall. Something hissed from the hallway. Hunt, disoriented, tried to get up at least enough to peek out from behind the furniture and see what was actually going on there, but the program kept him on the ground floor. A three-headed dog the size of a mouse was running around the back of the sofa, growling at Hunt: "Danger! Notify the juridictor! Danger!" Nicholas waved his sixth finger (it was the only part of his body he could move) and turned off the MUI overlay, opening the A&S link just in case.

The cerberus disappeared, and then, as if on cue, there was a loud crack and Marina's scream. Now Nicholas knew for sure that the legal insurance network in the apartment had been turned off. From his corner, he could only see the back of the sofa, the ceiling, a section of the wall, and the top of the door to the office. It was open.

What the hell was going on here? The last thing he needed was a gang of juridictor corporation lawyers interrogating everyone around him.

A male voice rang out. Marina briefly answered the question.

Irritated, he turned off Baryshnikov and stood up on his own.

He just managed to see him in mid-air, jumping over the sofa. Then Hunt was thrown brutally to the floor, his arms were dislocated from his shoulders and pressed against his back, the juridictor's pin was torn from his chest, something cold hit Nicholas in the back of the head and pushed his head even lower, his

nose collided with the parquet, the crushed cartilage shifted inside. Horrified, Hunt sucked in air through his teeth. Abandoning all hope, he sent an alarm signal to the juridictor. He knew they wouldn't make it in time. All he could do was curse himself inwardly; What did you need, you brass cretin, to ask about this Fungus at all...?

III

Monday, bloody Monday

BEFORE the Shadow chased them into the elevator, Hunt managed to peek into the second bedroom, where the body of the assassin was lying on the green carpet. The Shadow killed him by breaking his spine and crushing his skull, deeply damaging his brain. The assassin could have been the Shadow's genetic brother: two meters tall with a mean uppercut, long arms and legs, bull neck, he even had the same haircut (specifically, none of it), the same complexion (phenomulatto). Only their clothes were different: the assassin —an expensive suit from Mount; the Shadow —linen trousers and a checkered shirt. Now this shirt presented a more abstract pattern, long smears of blood introduced expressive elements. When Marina suggested that he change, he only snapped: "There's no time," glaring at Hunt. Nicholas spread his arms helplessly: once summoned, the jurdas could no longer be recalled, no apology over the phone for a false alarm would satisfy them, such was the procedure of private police, broadcast far and wide so that potential attackers knew in advance that they were screwed from the first second.

The Shadow could have killed the other one much more hygienically, Hunt was sure of that. So why the hell had he been messing around in his brain? For something, for sure. Perhaps he was afraid of automatic post-mortem reactions. Could implants animate the dead? Eh, probably not, the body must have energy, all the implant is capable of is inducing cortical impulses. But on the other hand...

The Corpse-Thief looked like a small pistol with a wide black metal snout attached to a short barrel. Before the Shadow put it in his pants pocket, Nicholas, getting up from the floor, examined the gadget (in fact, he couldn't tear his

eyes away from it). That snout moved as if constantly sniffing in all directions, the black lips quivering restlessly. Only Baryshnikov, turned back on, prevented Hunt from shuddering at the memory of the cold touch of those lips on the back of his head.

In the elevator descending to the garages, Nicholas asked about the Corpse-Thief —not to the Shadow, and not to Marina either: with a motionless face, he uttered the question into the space in front of him.

Vittorio answered:

"A Corpse-Thief. It injects its own, closed implant. Invasive. Now shut up."

Vassone's luggage bags were at their feet. Both were ready before Hunt even appeared. Marina was carrying them, the Shadow had to have his hands free. In order to break my neck, Hunt thought.

He remembered Vassone's words well. The pardon came just as Shadow's knee was squeezing the last of the air from Hunt's lungs. In the first sentence she spared his life, in the second —she promised death.

So first a hasty: "No, leave him!" and when he was already on his feet and came out from behind the sofa: "But if you try anything," here she aimed a finger at him (it was trembling slightly, as was her whole hand) "you'll be the first to go to hell."

"Easy, easy," Nicholas muttered, massaging his sprained nose. "The jurdas will be here soon."

They looked at him so much that he was sure the Shadow would attack him again, he could almost hear Vassone's order.

But she only nodded at the bloody pheno-mulatto.

"Cover him."

The man didn't blink. He turned around and disappeared into the depths of the apartment.

However, when after a moment Nicholas tried to contact the New York branch of A&S Justice Inc. again, he was surprised. It turned out that all the functions of his implant's communication module were blocked.

So he was their prisoner. Where and from whom did Marina want to escape? What were those screams he heard?

He went, looked: a corpse.

Marina went in to take the bags.

"Who is he?" he asked, barely hiding his feelings.

"He wanted to kill me," Vassone explained laconically.

"Him —who...? Who is this...?"

"Shadow. For them. I hired him. Step aside, we have to hurry."

In his entire life, he had seen three dead people with his own eyes, two of them —in the last four days. He tried to look away, but it was very difficult.

He grabbed Marina by the arm when she tried to get past him (the bags additionally complicated the maneuver).

"Let go of me!"

"It's all because of December, right?"

"What the hell is December? Let go! Vittorio!"

The Shadow came running; that's how Nicholas learned his name. Hunt let go of Marina's arm, raised his empty hands, stepped back.

"Come on, come on!" The Shadow urged them. "I bet they're on their way!"

Nicholas went back for the cane. Vittorio almost threw him into the elevator.

In the garage they got into a black minivan, the car started moving immediately. Neither the Shadow nor Marina gave their destination aloud, so he didn't know where they were actually going. Vittorio was sitting in the very back, staring blankly at the blacked-out window, probably deep in a heavy blindness. Marina seemed to be blinded too: having thrown her bags under the seats, she curled up in a fetal position on the half-turned armchair, knees under her chin, head down, completely un-Marina-like. Nicholas was terrified that this was another personality crisis. Was she crying? She must have been crying earlier.

He sat down next to her, carefully touching her shoulder, her collarbone, her cheek.

"What?"

"They killed Jason" she blurted out in ragged breaths. "All my children..."

"Marina, you..."

"...are dead."

He hugged her uncertainly.

"You'll have another one, you can afford it."

Lucifer chuckled into his left ear.

DURING the ride, he had time to watch the entire sequence of the attack in slow motion and with descriptions from the visual analyzer. It was fifteen seconds in total, but he kept scrolling through them until he had practically memorized every frame (the implant scanned V at a rate of 290 frames per second, police scans required even more with 1,000 per second).

Baryshnikov reacted the moment he noticed the gun in the hand of the man running into the living room. At that time, in real time, Nicholas didn't even see the man himself. Baryshnikov threw Hunt over the sofa and Nicholas couldn't see anything at all. That is: he saw the upper part of the office door opening. But not then either —he didn't see it then, it registered on the implant. He saw it in the replay. He guessed that was where Vittorio had run out from. The bastard must have been really fast: on the way from the living room to the second bedroom, he caught up with and killed the attacker before he shot Marina; and that after starting late. The assassin had a good few meters of advantage. True, the Shadow was running up from behind. Hunt took a closer look at the assassin's gun. The manager dug out the Guns & Ammo catalog from his memory and ran the program. The Devil described the copy to Nicholas as to the price and year of production. A Klinger .11 "Needler" automatic, fully compatible with implants, standard magazine capacity: 32+1. A neat, elegant weapon. So the question was: where did that gun disappear to? He hadn't seen it on the trawl. Similarly —with Vittorio (and the Corpse-Thief was clearly sticking out of his pants pocket). So? Would they have left it in Vassone's apartment? Highly doubtful. Even if they had —it would have been in the

assassin's hand. But the corpse's hands were empty. Apparently they had taken it: either the Shadow or Marina. Nevertheless, the Shadow didn't have it with him. Marina and her luggage were left. Holding her like that while crying, he was able to feel all the hard objects under her clothes, but he couldn't feel any. So the bags. Vittorio seemed to remain completely blinded, but Hunt would bet any amount that in reality this was not the case—even if it wasn't the Shadow himself, then his cunning programs were certainly watching.

He wondered what the jurdas would do if they found only a dead stranger at the scene. Nicholas's blocked phone would also give them something to think about. Without a doubt, a kidnapping/murder report would be filed with the NYPD. They would request the hotel network recordings, and here's another surprise: the apartment's network had been disabled by Marina Vassone, who rented it. So: find Dr. Vassone. Her phone was also disabled. The lawyers enter the game. They reached an agreement with Marina's juridictor. A second investigation will be launched, and a second kidnapping/murder report will be filed with the NYPD. Dense information networks will be set up: every file in any way related to Nicholas Hunt or Marina Vassone will end up in the hands of the corporate sneakers. It would take them about fifteen minutes to figure out that the missing people had been having sexual relations with each other. At this stage, the juridictors' (and probably the public police's) profiling programs would be spitting out a hundred scenarios, sorted by their degree of probability. The behavioral matrix will be updated as more information comes in and depending on the results of consultations with hastily called human profilers (because here, however, a live person is needed, Hunt knew that best: no expert program has been able to profile the Numbers as Vassone did). Following the tracks left by Hunt, the juridictor's sneakers will very quickly reach the Team. Fortzhauser, who has been notified, will get his people back on their feet and, in turn, alert the FBI, EDC, DIA and HCI. There is even a possibility that the FBI will apply the National Security Act to the juridictors. But that will only happen after a long court battle, at least a week with the most express procedure. In the meantime: blocking accounts, searching apartments, listening to family and friends' phones, changing passwords and codes, a circular to the institutions. Of course, Hunt and Vassone's data will also be sent to airports, all travel agencies, and counterintelligence servers (in case the missing people want to contact the "legal" part of foreign espionage)—and this is according to the scenario of their perfidious betrayal.

However, most of the above was just Nicholas's guesswork, he didn't know

much about security procedures and police work, because where else would he know them —from movies? from games? He dug into his memory implants a bit, but he found only scraps of information, and rather uncertain ones at that. After all, even that Marina had turned off the legal insurance network in her apartment —even that he only guessed. True, he had quite strong premises for such a conclusion: if she hadn't turned it off, the hotel security would have been on their feet within a minute. But he didn't know anything certain about the cameras and microphones in the corridor. So he did the right thing, forcing the Shadow to forcefully push him into the elevator —there would always be some trace, a clue, a clear appearance of involuntary action.

What next? Sooner or later they would be found, there was no doubt about that. The question, however, was: how would Marina and the Shadow react then? Marina was practically falling apart, she could have done this, she could have done the opposite —she was standing between attractants again. The Shadow, on the other hand, Nicholas knew nothing about except that Marina called him Vittorio, and that Vittorio seemed to really care about her safety and listened to her to some extent. At least enough not to fire the Corpse-Thief at Hunt's brain. But when push came to shove, wouldn't he reconsider his decision? Nicholas was just an additional complication, a twist in the plan. It could be that Chigieza (or someone else from Langolian) had tipped Marina off and advised her to disappear. Perhaps the Langolians were already waiting for them there, somewhere at the destination of this journey. How would they react to Hunt's presence? The second question, however, was different: what version would the FBI people put out and how would Washington react? It wasn't even about whether there would be any evidence or what the Bureau's investigation would show. The point is that if Hunt's name appeared in the same sentence with words like "kidnapping," "leak," "murder," "Langolian," "corruption," "suspicious," "unclear," "unexplained," and the like often enough to permanently bind into memes —then he might as well just swallow a Kevorkian: he'll never return to Real Life.

For now, he consoled himself with the fact that he still had the A-V scan on. If the jurdas caught up with them fast enough, and if they carried out the operation efficiently enough (did they know that their opponent was an ex-Shadow?), the scan record could be evidence that completely exonerated him. Heck, those are two ifs, and there's a third if. If Vittorio came to his senses and unleashed another offensive program on Hunt, this time to completely shut down and reset his implant... Then blood would ensue. There's no hiding the

fact that this is the most likely scenario.

In general, that Shadow complicated the situation a lot. Where the hell did Marina dig him up from? "I hired him," a good one! One would think, unemployed Shadows are hanging out on the streets outside NEti by the dozens. If it weren't for Vittorio... If he wasn't who he was... Hunt would have managed to get to the Klinger (the gun can't be hidden particularly deep, the bags were packed earlier, it's probably in one of the side pockets, it would be best to feel them with his foot first) and shoot them both.

He had in Toulouse Ranger in his memory: an application for the Nobis system motion editors (and Baryshnikov was compatible with it), which operated a handgun. So he would have had time to take the Klinger out, uncock it, aim, hit Vittorio, aim, hit Vassone. Probably. But the Shadow —my God, if he hit the Shadow with that gun, even straight in the heart, even straight in the eye, he would only get furious and beat Nicholas with the gun torn from him along with his fingers.

What did Hunt know about the Shadows: not much, but enough to avoid dismissing the idea as a hysterical fantasy. The nanocyborgization of special forces volunteers had begun a decade or so ago. (In fact, the modern military consisted almost exclusively of info-economists, hardware technicians, and special forces personnel.) As far as Hunt could tell, most of the research in the final years of the Bridge Project had been about the comprehensive transformation of *Homo sapiens* using N-technology and RNAdition. The money had come from the Department of Defense via DARPA and, in a much weaker stream, from the Department of Health. Special forces soldiers had already seemed like a specialized subspecies, if only because of the very high bar of their DNAM profiles—to the point where they began to talk about a specific soldier genotype. Now, there were also progressive RNAditions (immunizing against increasingly virulent versions of weapons B and C, optimizing physiology and raising efficiency thresholds) and nanocyborgization at the cellular level. Of course, like the entire Bridge project, it began with implants and neural connections. But secret implementations were not hindered by legal barriers, artificial limitations of convention, and reports about Chinese Shadows soon appeared in the media. It turned out then that we were not resting on our laurels either. Soon the first Shadows began to leave the army ranks when their contracts ended, and their superhuman abilities were widely advertised by their new employers, mainly juridical corporations, recruiting Shadows for their private police. This

no doubt impressed juridical service users —“No government police force can keep you as safe as your corporate Shadow security guards!” (The government police force couldn’t afford to hire Shadows.) On the one hand, Nicholas knew that ninety percent of the comic book aura of invincibility was hype, with no basis in fact. On the other hand, he happened to know that details like the Shadows’ mandatory periodic psychiatric examinations or the fact that they didn’t wear bulletproof suits were true. He had once seen a 2D version of edited A-V scans from one of the Shadows’ counter-terrorist operations —back in Real Life —and it had really made a stunning impression on him. The whole thing was pre-edited and lasted less than a second from the intro to the triple clear. They ran the film in ten times slow motion so that you could even tell what was actually happening there. Hunt had those images in his memory and would have had to be much more desperate to reach for a gun in a Shadow’s presence. To tell the truth, he had not imagined such desperation.

So he drove through the night in New York in that minivan with darkly tinted windows, with a trembling Marina Vassone in his arms, a silent and motionless Vittorio within two arms’ reach, the assassin’s pistol hidden somewhere in the luggage under the seats —he was driving toward the unknown and all that was left for him were futile, wordless conversations with a mockingly smiling Lucifer. He had conjured up a visualization of the implant manager, because he wanted to get some cursory legal interpretations of the situation he found himself in. After all, he probably had the entire legislation and a ton of precedents in mind.

”What’s the threat to me?” he asked the Devil in OVR.

Lucifer was leaning toward him confidentially, hunched in the opposite seat, as if the others —the Shadow, Marina —could actually eavesdrop on their dialogue.

”Complicity in murder and a dozen or so more or less serious violations of the NEti. But your juridictor’s lawyers should get you out of everything, it will end with a deal, maybe that won’t be necessary.”

”What are my chances of being completely excluded from the case.”

”As far as I can tell —none.”

”Serious shit.”

"Unfortunately, sir."

"So what do you advise?"

Lucifer scratched his left eyebrow with his claw.

"I don't know the whole situation. It would be good to let yourself get a little battered under the N.E.Ti."

"That's all I know. I'm asking what to do about Vassone and Langolian."

"Unfortunately, I can't help you."

"Can you break through that comms cotton?"

"I've been trying nonstop, sir."

"But what did he do? Even Hedge asked me to remove the security! This guy just went in like butter. Did he know the codes? Where from?"

"I don't know, sir. It's impossible, such crackers shouldn't even theoretically exist."

"Well, get me that sniper Nobis and re-profile Baryshnikov. I want to have at least a glimmer of a chance with the Shadow, heh, heh, heh, if there's an opportunity to escape."

"I recommend caution, sir."

"Don't talk," Hunt snorted. "You can't scare me any more anyway. But I have to do something: the longer this goes on, the more likely I am to end up in the same pigeonhole as Vassone."

"I would suggest killing Dr. Vassone, sir. Then the Shadow will lose his employer, and the whole escape will make no sense. *After the fact*, he will no longer have a reason to harm you, sir, he would only worsen his situation. Lawyers should easily classify such a murder as self-defense. Because it is obvious that you have no chance against a Shadow. Of course, I would advise you to refrain for now, while there are still other options open to you. But in my opinion, these are still less dangerous than trying to escape the Shadow. On the other hand, you should not delay too much, because he could break in again at any moment and completely disable your implant, and then you probably won't

be able to handle it.”

Nicholas shook his finger at Lucifer. Realizing that he had made the gesture outside the OVR, he lowered his hand.

”Aren’t you worrying too much about this whole Necropolis thing? Maybe I should change the MUI, for example to Cartoon?”

”The nature of the visualization has no effect on the work of expert programs, sir,” the Devil got offended.

”You lack software for processing the psyche, Lucifer. He would break my neck in pure revenge.”

”Shadow Reflexes, sir, that’s not what you understand by that word.”

”I’d rather not find out the hard way. Well, keep trying to break through and as soon as you succeed, send an alarm ping. Download the news too, it would be useful to find out if they haven’t buried me yet. Open the city plans, maybe I can see something, then I’ll find out where we’re going.”

”Yes, sir.”

The Devil saluted to the right corner. Hunt nodded at him with his sixth finger, and the fiend disappeared in a cloud of hydrogen sulphide. The stench still lingered in the car for a long time. A nasty application.

Nicholas noticed that Marina had fallen asleep in his arms in the meantime. Since Vittorio still showed no signs of extra-orthovirtual consciousness, Hunt was the only fully conscious person in the minivan. Yet he felt an alien gaze on him —Vittorio’s? Whose then? —and once he thought, he couldn’t stop: I’m embracing her, touching her, body touching body, the indecency of form prevents the muscles from relaxing, how so, why did I invade her privacy at all, now as if naked, now as if humiliated, Baryshnikov is holding his face, but that no longer matters, because by allowing the sleeping Marina to reflect in my body the reverse of my helplessness, I’m vulgarly making public hidden forms, someone is watching, someone is seeing —a vulgar exhibitionism of body and soul.

But he didn’t let her out of his arms. She settled into her sleep in a childlike way, her head nestled under his collarbone, her clenched hand reached somewhe-

re under his arm, he could feel the warmth of her breath on his chest through his thin shirt, her weight forced him to sink even deeper into the seat, so he hugged her even tighter, she filled all his senses, the slow rhythm of that breath, to which he listened willy-nilly, forced the rhythm of his own thoughts to slow down, his pulse to slow down, the car trembled and shuddered slightly, racing through the darkness into the unknown, all of this synchronized into one long, deep pulse. She brought Hunt great peace, great silence, he fell asleep.

THE car finally stopped, but that didn't wake Hunt —Marina did wake up and, hastily freeing herself from Nicholas' embrace, tore him from his sleep. Hunt, still very sluggish in thought and movement, lazily reached after her, hooking his fingers into the sleeve of her turtleneck. She tore that hand away without even looking back, as if she were shaking off a large insect. Nicholas regained his senses and cursed his treacherous reflexes.

He heaved himself up on his cane, hissing with unexpected pain halfway through the movement: the shoulder joints, tortured by the Shadow in Vassone's apartment, came to mind. This, in turn, raised Hunt's gaze to Vittorio himself, who was just pushing back the manual lock on the side door of the minivan. Nicholas called the manager and looked at the Shadow as he left.

"Unfortunately, sir," Lucifer spread his arms.

The car had stopped inside a private garage, poorly lit and filled to the low ceiling with smaller and larger fragments of historic products of the American automotive industry. Ironwork was piled up against the walls in the form of rickety pyramids, bared dangerous edges from the shelves of rusty frames, hung on cables and hooks. It was a miracle that the car had somehow maneuvered here at all, considering how little free space was left in the garage for safe parking.

Marina followed the Shadow out, Hunt stuck his head out. The room was even smaller than he had thought, probably designed for only two vehicles —the heavy gate, already lowered to the bare concrete of the floor, was only a few inches from the rear bumper of the black van. Right in front of its hood, on the other hand, was a narrow staircase leading upwards.

"So where are we anyway?" Hunt asked Marina, involuntarily lowering his voice.

In response, she looked at him with such cold fury in her light blue eyes that he could barely restrain himself from saying defensively: "It's not my fault." He didn't even really know what exactly wasn't his fault here.

She had already turned and started up the stairs. The Shadow let her through —namely, so that he could personally take care of Hunt. He grabbed his arm and pulled Vassone, leading him ahead of him. Nicholas knew there was no point in trying to pull away, even though the grip was painful. So he followed obediently, especially since he would have followed them anyway. In a different situation, he would probably have tried to create the impression of voluntary participation (as a prisoner, he remained enslaved by forms of submission), but now he was not sure whether it wouldn't be better to publicly present himself as a kidnapping victim. So maybe he should start pulling away...? If there was someone to fight back from. Does NEti apply here? Doubtful —if these rooms were covered by a legal insurance network, Marina wouldn't have shown her face.

They entered a spacious hall, no windows, but five doors. Only one of them was open —behind them were piles of boxes covered with French labels. The Devil quickly translated them and explained: "Embargoed neuroleptics". Hunt looked around the empty hall, devoid of any decoration, and quickly drew a conclusion: an underground clinic. There was a gloomy, dark atmosphere here —but in the Necropolis shell there was such an atmosphere everywhere.

Vittorio pointed to one of the closed doors with his free hand. At the same time, however, another one opened and a short black man in a gray monosuit peered into the hall.

"Oh, right." He scratched his head, looked back, smiled apologetically and disappeared for a moment.

Having reappeared with a small device in his hand, he approached Marina, pressed it to her hand and glanced at the side cargo. The Devil stood behind him and, sticking his claw to the device, explained to Hunt:

"A DNAM reader."

"I know," Nicholas snapped back at him in the OVR.

The pheno-black checked Vittorio in turn. Then he looked questioningly at

Hunt. From there it went like dominoes: the Shadow looked at Marina, and Marina fixed a cold gaze on Nicholas. Nicholas also did not resist and turned his eyes to the pheno-black, smiling and shrugging as he did so.

The host scratched his head with the reader in silence.

The Shadow yanked Hunt to the left, opened the door for him and pushed him into the dark interior. Nicholas heard a hard slam and the click of the surprising lock —when he turned around, he did not see even the narrowest line of light: the room was completely airtight.

“I hope it’s at least air-conditioned. So what now?”

“Please look around.”

“I can’t see anything.”

“One moment, sir, I’m mapping it. Please hold on.”

Hunt tucked his cane under his arm and clapped (again, white pain stabbed him through the shoulder joints).

“Thank you. Now?”

The outlines of the walls appeared, the vague shapes of equipment —desks? chairs? wardrobes? The surrounding shadows varied: from the deepest darkness, that which lingered in distant corners, to the soft grayness closest to Nicholas, in which it seemed to him that he really saw hands moving in front of wide-open eyes.

The Devil emerged from the darkness.

“Try the passwords of old lighting installations,” he suggested, “and feel around here, I’ll show you, maybe it’s even older.”

Nicholas did all this, without effect.

“Any more ideas?” he snorted.

Lucifer folded his arms across his chest.

“They’ll murder you, sir. They have no choice.”

"I know," Nicholas muttered, and leaned heavily on his cane.

"I'll take you to a chair. Here. Oh. Careful. Yes." Hunt sat down.

"Thanks."

Lucifer conjured a stool and sat down as well.

"You haven't explained everything to me, sir. For example, I don't understand Dr. Vassone's reaction to the mention of Chigueza, or the reason for the assassination attempt itself, but from the data I have, I can legally draw the following conclusions. Dr. Vassone has an operation scheduled here, most likely through this Vittorio. She plans to escape and change her identity, and to do this she must permanently change her phenotype and genotype, so as not to be recognized either from random NEti network records or DNAM identifiers. Most likely, there is a corpse of a woman with a skeleton similar to hers lying somewhere in a cold store here —they will exchange cashchips. Yet this whole undertaking would make no sense if you were to be released later. They have to kill you. Even if not Dr. Vassone, who may have some sentimental attachment to you, then the Shadow will insist on it, his OVR strategists have certainly presented him with all the conditions clearly. If his opinion doesn't prevail, you surely don't doubt that the owners of this, um, Facility themselves will take care of their own safety? Sir?"

"Now you'd better tell me how I am..."

Blinded, he turned his head: the door opened and Marina entered. However, she immediately stepped back to the threshold and reached outside: the light in the room turned on. Now Hunt only blinked, even the OVR neural filters were of no help. He closed his eyes for a moment. "Does she have a gun in her hand?" He asked the Devil. Lucifer denied it.

He heard the door slam, and the sound that was most likely caused by the chair being moved across the rough floor. Marina sighed. He lifted his eyelids.

She was sitting opposite him, straddling a wooden chair with its backrest turned forward, her chin resting on her clasped hands. This room was clearly a warehouse for antiques: the furniture she had chosen was carved with fantastic figures, dragons, elves, birch men.

The Devil stood behind Marina and shouted:

“Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

“Shut up!” Hunt barked at him in OVR.

Marina stared at Nicholas in silence, her eyes so bright, so indecently wide.

“I should kill you now,” Nicholas told her in a low voice.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Vittorio almost dragged me away by force.”

“Is he standing there behind the door?”

“Ahh. . .”

“He wouldn’t let me out alive.”

“No.”

Hunt gave the Devil a dark look. Lucifer shrugged, then clenched his fists and gave him two thumbs down.

“It seems I paid you a visit at an unusually bad time” Nicholas smiled at Marina. “I guess it’s over, huh? You shouldn’t have much trouble getting rid of the body here.”

“It’s Fortzhauser, right?”

“What?”

“The colonel who dug up Chigieza?”

“Please confirm!” Lucifer hissed.

“No,” Hunt shook his head. “It was me.”

“You’ve let people in!” the Devil insisted. “Sir! Many people! Everyone knows! Sir...!”

“You came straight to me with this...” Marina continued. “Why? The law dictates a different procedure. Any evidence? From whom?”

“What does it matter now? With this corpse and after our disappearance—they’ll find out eventually anyway.”

“You see, I’d rather they get this evidence, Fortzhauser, the FBI, whoever’s in charge, and as soon as possible.”

Nicholas tapped his cane thoughtfully against the leg of a chair. The marching rhythm drew his gaze from Vassone’s face to the painting of a storm-tossed ship leaning against a cabinet.

“That container ship that got on your course during the transport to the *Curtwaiter*...”

“Yes. They wanted to kill me even then.”

“I wonder what exactly made them do it.” He returned his gaze to her. But this time she looked away.

“When he came for the records of Number Four, I had...” she stopped. “I got a bit carried away then. Conflicting motivations, you know. I didn’t really control my expression. They must have been terrified that I would fall apart completely and accidentally or deliberately reveal everything. Too unstable personality. You can’t trust a lunatic. They knew that I met with my son later, we talked for a long time in private. Who else could I have told? Now I’m surprised that you didn’t have a car accident too.”

“But you didn’t warn me.”

“I didn’t warn Jason either.”

He watched the curve of her lower lips. He was glad, because she didn’t tremble when Marina said that.

After a moment she raised her gaze and looked at Hunt with the same bright eyes. Her, no one else. Without a doubt, these were sick reactions, but he couldn’t help it: he was happy, sincerely glad.

“Langolian,” he stated, forcibly reversing the train of thought.

“Yes.”

“Blackmail? Money?”

“No, no, it was never coercion, it was at all...”

“But you betrayed them. You spied on them. I bet it leaked out this way, through you and Chigueza’s people. After all, employees are leaving the Lango-lian Group, as are the shareholders. Thanks to this, Hong Kong, Transvaal and the other kingdoms of the Wars are growing today.”

Vassone shook her head.

”You don’t understand at all. The order itself is different. First there was Maria. If it weren’t for her, I would never have gone beyond the initial hypotheses. Where do you think I got the money for all that research? Grants don’t fall from the sky, especially when it comes to such fantastic abstractions. There are direct or indirect commercial motives behind every allocation of funds. Krasnov usually explains it as...”

“I know, I’ve heard.”

“Well, I’m no exception. Everyone has some contacts. When they were screening me for the Program, they certainly learned all about my supervisors, donors, foundations that I had used. But did that disqualify me? No. Because then they would have to disqualify every active scientist-practitioner in the country. Ninety-five percent of non-humanist departments in North America are partly or entirely financially dependent on private companies, in the EU it’s only slightly less.” She straightened up, mechanically straightened the sleeves of her turtleneck, pulling them both up to half her forearm; the disorganized movements of her body released blind energy. “I liked Chigueza at first, by the way. A nice savage. She has already put in a good word for my projects several times. How do you think Krasnov’s ‘Gene Chaos’ got to me? How did I get to Senator Tito? I had to conduct a maximum-wide screening of DNAM, and for that I needed your Program’s data banks. That’s why I contacted you. Tito owed a favor to Vermundter, whose patron is Haka Chigueza, and opened the entrance to the Program for me. That you happened to be in charge at the time—that had nothing to do with it. Coincidence. It seems you fell there through some...”

“That’s really irrelevant,” Hunt interrupted. ”But did you really not realize what getting involved in such a government project meant? You signed the commitments. The fact is that you were consciously breaking the law.”

”Even if I did, you were no better than anyone else. Don’t play the hypocrite here. We both know how this machine works. You certainly did better:

he married off his sister to a member of the establishment, he got himself into trouble for years. Was he also in line with the law when he accepted me on the recommendation of my brother-in-law, the senator? What, maybe you didn't know what such a recommendation meant? How on earth would I have developed such connections? Even a Nobel Prize wouldn't be enough. These connections are built into the system. If it weren't for them, we wouldn't have a theory of thought, or Estep, or Toulouse 10, or Fungus, or even Project Bridge and implants. Such are the customs. I'm not making excuses: I'm reminding you of the obvious. After what I've heard about you, you're probably the last person who would have the right to feed me such sermons here."

He couldn't help but smile.

"What did you hear?"

For some reason, this confused her. She looked away again.

"Now I'm in a no-win situation..."

"You'll have to..."

"What am I..."

"But what exactly did Langolian want?" Hunt continued, pointedly ignoring Marina's irritation, as if he were asking himself. "What would they gain from it? A few weeks' monopoly on Fungus? But did you even know about Fungus? Toulouse 10 wasn't theirs either, not even Vermundter's, as it turns out. But Langolian knew about December. They were waiting for him. So what..."

"What's December?"

"...would constitute a profit from their investment in your projects?"

"Why do you think I sent those poor bastards up there into orbit?" she snapped at Nicholas, angrily. "Not for this idiotic 'contact'! Their EEG records..."

Suddenly she realized what she was actually doing, saw the entire absurdity of the situation.

She fell silent, freezing her face instantly. Nicholas, with his legs crossed, his left hand stretched out to the side for nonchalant support on his cane, his lips slightly bent under his mustache toward a grimace of a malicious smile

—answered her with a calm, open look. Yes, now he was winning with the smoothness of his bodice and the sharpness of the edges of his trouser legs, he was winning with the durability of his make-up, the symmetry of his hair comb, the elegance of his stiff cuffs. Now with a short movement of his foot in the still immaculately white tabi —he was reducing her to dependent, slave forms.

“Any scruples?” he threw out with a hint of amusement in his voice.

“You will not analyze me here.”

“You have to talk to me,” he concluded with obvious satisfaction. “As long as we’re talking like this, a decision hasn’t been made. Because you simply don’t know what to do with me.”

The words had barely faded, out of the blue —they were already on the other side of NEti. They even looked at each other differently now, a direct look in the face no longer necessarily meant a cheeky challenge.

Marina nervously ran her hand through her hair. He recognized the gesture. She saw it in his eyes and lowered her hand.

“You would betray me, wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you?”

Behind the woman’s back, the Devil was giving Hunt desperate signs.

Nicholas dug into the options with his sixth finger and jumped from Necropolis to the Middle-earth. It brightened, the shadows lost their sharpness and flowed deeper under the equipment, Gandalf fell from the ceiling and burned Lucifer with one touch of his staff. Then he turned to Hunt and said to him in a deep voice with an Irish accent:

“Promise her what she wants. Show her fear. Convince her of your attachment. Give...”

So Nicholas completely turned off the manager’s visualization. An abyss opened under the wizard, he fell into it with a prolonged scream.

Hunt returned his gaze to Vassone. Now, outside Nectropolis, her complexion was no longer so sickly pale, she looked warmer, although that could have been an illusion beyond OVR.

Nicholas was already slightly irritated by all this.

"Spare me that, Marina. I won't believe in any miraculous rescue anyway." He rubbed his forehead with a tired movement. "I don't know if I would betray you. Probably yes. In favorable circumstances. Besides —how can any man know in advance what he will do in the future? After all, you are a kind of profiler, you should know about it. I can promise you anything you want here. But it won't convince you, or even those shady doctors. I know you're trying and it's hard for you. I'll be cruel: yes, it's all your fault. But it's not like some divine psychoanalyst is setting up such choice tests for us in order to test supposed virtues. You will decide, as the moment will decide, in which direction circumstances will push you; that's all. Besides, they have to silence me, even if millions of them..."

"Vittorio could vouch for you," she offered.

That stopped Hunt.

"Would they go for it?" he asked reluctantly after a long moment.

She shrugged, already retreating.

"I don't know. But Vittorio..."

They fell to the floor along with the chairs, when the entire building shook to its foundations. Antiques fell on them. The light went out. He was terrified, because it immediately jolted him to his feet, and he threw himself into the darkness in a long leap. Again, he cursed Baryshnikov. The fact that Nicholas turned off the manager's visualization does not mean that the manager deactivated himself. Recognizing the critical situation, the threat to the owner's life, he used all the means at his disposal to save it. The motion editor was one of those means —apparently somewhere in his setup he had an option of temporarily taking direct control, which Hunt had not disabled. After the incident in Vassone's apartment I should have remembered that, he cursed now, out of breath from the forced athletics. I had to define the boundary conditions, or turn the whole damn thing off. Huh. I'll break my legs.

After the third step, there was a short tussle with a man invisible to Hunt —Vittorio? Both of them collapsed onto the concrete when a terrible bang tore the air inside the building, and one of the walls collapsed on them. It had to be a wall, what else, the pain of hard bruises flowed through the nerves from probably every part of Nicholas's body, for a second he had the impression that

he was being crushed alive in some gigantic press, his bones would crack soon, his skull would crack (he could feel the tension), throwing out hot mush of brain, he would die here in the vibrating darkness, that's what. Damn, damn, damn.

But Baryshnikov tore him out of that too. Time and time and time and time again, Hunt crawled out from under the rubble, rhythmically pulling himself up on his elbows, then he grabbed something he couldn't see, jerked his body—he hadn't even suspected that such strength lay dormant in his muscles, never electrochemically stimulated to great performance—and got out from under the heart attack. The editor opened his eyes, although they were stinging from the raised dust and dirt, immediately drawing tears. A blurred brightness broke through the dark mists: there was an exit to the light.

He ran—but where to? He could only see that light, and that dimly, without even guessing its source. What was happening here at all, where were these tremors coming from? He stepped on something soft, which groaned loudly as he jumped off it. People were lying here. Who? Marina? Vittorio? How long had I run away from that warehouse?

Turn Baryshnikov off! He was already bending his sixth finger—but he didn't have enough courage to finish the movement. He knew what would happen then: he would fall like a wet rag doll, defeated by pain, defeated by his body, completely disoriented in the half-light that bit his eyes.

He went through some door, but turned back on the threshold. Why? He only managed to see a figure of light spreading on the opposite wall, from which a human silhouette jumped out, then there was another shock, a gust threw Nicholas on his back. Baryshnikov immediately pulled him to his feet. Hunt was already breathing through his wide open mouth, almost spitting the rough air from his lungs, and drawing it in with a painful effort, as if he were tearing the coils of barbed wire through his trachea.

The dull sound of the distant wind, with which the rushing blood resonated inside his skull, drowned out practically all other sounds, and Vittorio's scream broke through to him only when he ran past him with Vassone thrown over his right shoulder, clearly unconscious, his left hand occupied by a caricaturally angular gun, from which yellow cones of shots were shooting into the darkness of the long corridor.

What did the Shadow shout:

“Gas! Gas! Gas!”

Baryshnikov edited Nicholas’ desperate sprint in the wake of Vittorio, who was already disappearing around the bend. Hunt was now running only by the will of the program. He could see no windows anywhere, all the doors he passed were closed, it seemed that the bare corridor led deep into an endless labyrinth encompassing the entire district. Another shock, another bang, a gust of wind in the back, what building is this, where am I, in the basement, under or above the ground, maybe this garage was on some low sublevel, where now...

They ran out into the street, the Shadow and Marina a dozen or so steps ahead of Nicholas. Vittorio hadn’t shot for several turns —and even before that Hunt had no idea who he was aiming at, because the editor wouldn’t let Nicholas look at him. Was someone chasing them? Even if he did, he didn’t hear the pursuit, which wasn’t surprising, the roar of blood was getting louder and louder. In any case, no one was shooting at them —he knew that, because they were still alive, in such a narrow corridor it was impossible to miss, one of the ricochets from the series would have reached them for sure.

So they ran out into the street and a block away, on the right, they saw a police blockade. Vehicles were parked across the roadway, an uneven line of maintenance robots were shooting at a building with wide beams of light, and above it all, small, elegant helicopters circled with the capital letters “NYPD” on their blind sides. Thirty to forty people had gathered at the barrier, and more were behind the blockade, uniformed and plainclothes. It must have taken some time for them to converge, deploy, and begin their attack, Hunt realized, catching his breath as he ran. Yet we were caught off guard in the clinic by a police assault. How could that be? Because if...

Suddenly there was a hiss, a gurgle, and a chorus of gasps as a tremor from the impact shook the building bathed in white light.

Nicholas didn’t realize when he took the first step in that direction, staring at the spectacular scene. Perhaps the implant manager had made the right decision, perhaps it was simply necessary to try – but it did not do much good. The pavement splashed in a flowery way a dozen or so inches in front of Hunt’s foot, and Baryshnikov immediately turned a hundred and eighty degrees, toward the Shadow, who was hiding the gun under his shirt, untucked. Why in the ground, not in the head? Nicholas shouted to himself. It was hard to say who he was mad at. He almost resented the shot, that it had not been fatal. Freshly

spat out from the corridors of probable death, freed from the cell of certain death – he desperately needed some Anselm, at whom he could freely scream until his pulse returned to normal.

Vassone was already on her feet, leaning her arm against a wall covered in graffiti that glowed in the semi-darkness of the city night. Coughing, she followed Vittorio with her gaze. Would he have aimed higher if she hadn't been looking?

Hunt couldn't even look him in the eye, because the Shadow was already running along the row of cars parked at the curb, looking for a candidate for easy theft, i.e., a car without a judictor's logo and possibly old.

Nicholas passed the half-open door to the pimp's room from which they had run out. The editor didn't turn his head, so he had no chance to look. After all, a pursuing stormtrooper could jump out at any moment, why didn't either of them seem concerned about it?

He approached Marina. The graffiti burned her pupils, comic book heroes with burning eyes were milling around in murderous-erotic tangles.

"Marina," Hunt began, trying in vain to externalize his sudden terror —because those weren't his words, not his tongue, not his larynx! "let me go, I swear I won't..."

He touched the gash on her cheek gently with his left hand.

Above her he could see Vittorio, twenty meters away, discreetly ripping the door off a white Nissan.

Vassone choked, snorting loudly. She fell to her knees. She was kicking at the graffiti. He looked at the Shadow, who was already inside the car. The skin of Marina's neck was very hot, the material of the turtleneck rough.

Yes! It was due! A life for a life! Without batting an eyelid she had sent me to my doom and now...

He yanked his sixth finger. He screamed and let go of her. She rolled onto her back, her face red, her drooling mouth open like a fish, her eyes staring blankly at the advertising sky. For a moment, its ugliness struck him.

At the same time, however, a sudden, hard silence fell upon him from the

previous source of constant noise—and he glanced back at the blockade. There was no blockade there any more: people had scattered to both sides of the street, driven onto the sidewalks by the bulldozer-like cleaning robots, leaving a clear space between the police cars lined up in the command center of the operation and Hunt. That was how he perceived it: as if they had all turned their attention to him at once. Three unmanned NYPD helicopters were racing toward Nicholas above the street, thrusting the stingers of their rifles from under their white bellies.

Tires screeched: he glanced to the left. The Nissan hadn't even fully slowed down yet, the Shadow was already outside, raising his gun, aiming the barrel at the center of Nicholas' face—that was the first thing Hunt saw, the first image on his pupils after he turned his gaze.

Because Nicholas himself stood there over the convulsing Marina and just turned his head, helpless without Baryshnikov, his arms hanging helplessly at his sides, his fingers still half-bent. He wanted to say something, now that he had his mouth back, but he didn't quite know what. Time was scrubbing at his eyes, a rough second after a second, all of two blinks from death, time, time, now almost tangible. It was an infinitesimal fraction of him, when the Shadow's hand turned the murder machine toward Hunt with a lightning movement, and he turned his head reflexively to look straight into the laser eyes, Marina wheezed, the helicopters clattered, the sweat on Nicholas's back, the blood on his bitten tongue, this was the quantum of life, a portion of reality, the corrosive light of reality, which would strike through the matrix of the senses and etch that figure into the plate of Nicholas' memory so deeply that in a hundred years, old Hunt would be able to reach out with his mind and feel the sharp furrows, and then they would come back to him: the smell of this street, the gasoline stench of the unemployed district, and the expression on the Shadow's face, down to the tiniest of its wrinkles, and the silhouette of the child in the window on the floor of the building opposite, and the patterns of the sky-high advertisements, and that pain that bordered on the moment already on the other side of it.

At the same time, Baryshnikov and bullets entered his body.

The editor overcame the bodily shock and pushed him behind the cover of the Nissan. Vittorio, on the other hand, did not hide, he jumped for Marina. He got hit in the shoulder, in the hip, a whole series in the thigh, he got hit in the top of the skull and from that he staggered. The woman screamed something hoarsely

through a constricted throat. He threw her and Nicholas into the car, which was already reversing, turning toward the exit of a side street. The broken windows were shattered from the impacts of the soft bullets of the police helicopters. Hunt looked with despair at his hands, his left one was covered in blood, stretching out toward Marina curled up on the dirty floor.

The Nissan accelerated on mesh tires, maneuvering through dark alleys without turning on its headlights, relying solely on radar and sonar, throwing its passengers right up to the roof. The clatter of helicopter rotors still accompanied them, the intensity rising, falling. The ripped bodywork screeched metallically. They turned, turned, turned —the surroundings flashed past the gouged windows: walls of shadow, canyons of semi-darkness, squares of night.

Hunt turned off the motion editor again, this time closing the application altogether. Just in time to fall completely defenseless back into the Shadow's claws. Vittorio pulled Nicholas up and laid him over the back of the front seat, face up, bending his head back to the limits of his vertebrae. Hunt cursed with effort, kicking into the air and clumsily punching Shadow's side with his fist, but at this point the instinct of self-preservation was already losing out to the torment of his body and there was no strength in these blows.

The Shadow leaned over him, smiling broadly. A mistake: it was not a smile. He was showing his teeth, his fangs boiling. He bit quickly, deeply, throwing his head forward and down in a snakelike motion, in an arc. Waves of heat passed over Nicholas's neck one after another: from Vittorio's breath, from his own spilled blood, from the venom released into his veins.

The poison spread rapidly. At first it took away the pain, and that was good. Then it took away the feeling in the rest of his body and dulled his other senses, and that was terrifying, because that was exactly how he imagined death. Some spots before his eyes, the clatter of bullet-torn sheet metal in his ears, the words of a nervous conversation... Finally, they took that away from him too. I don't understand, he groaned. Why. How. Who. I didn't want to.

They took Nicholas Hunt away, and then there was nothing left.

Contamination

SOMETHING was biting his calf. Sharp teeth tore at muscles, scraped bone, a shiver ran through his body, twisting his insides. Hunt jumped up with a hoarse scream, ready to blindly throw himself away from the vampiric Shadow, away from the fangs tearing his leg.

He must have been dreaming. No one was biting him. He even rolled up his trouser leg, but there was not the slightest trace on his skin. Maybe it was a cramp. After all, he could still feel the tearing pain in his muscle.

Frightened, irritated, he looked around the room. On the right, instead of a wall, he had glazed windows, through them the lazy brightness of the cloudy south shone. He squinted and saw the cuboids of nearby skyscrapers. It had to be somewhere on the twentieth floor, if not even higher. He did not recognize the facades of the buildings, this was not Manhattan, this was not the new center. He moved closer to the window and looked up. Having located the wheelhouse, he roughly figured out his location. Staten Island there, Westchester there... The new poverty district, not the demolished high-rises of the low-use zones, probably here.

But wait, what's the machine for?

He was about to call the implant manager when he remembered the clinic, Marina, his hands on her neck, he remembered the whole improbable thriller he had been sucked into last night —and he gave up. He was tempted to check if the communication module lock was still on, he also wanted to review the latest A-V records. But since he couldn't do it outside the MUI, he was stopped by

an irrational fear of confrontation born of a terrible suspicion —which he also just remembered —born of a terrible suspicion.

He got up from the white thermofoam, on which someone had obviously laid him during the night. Apart from the rectangle of the bed sprayed on the floor, nothing sullied the monotonous blue of the room. Getting up, he ran his hand over the thin blue carpet, and a small cloud of dust swirled in the air. At first glance, the room looked perfectly clean. Unused offices? He went to the door. It didn't open. He pushed. It was locked. He spoke to it. Nothing. So, back to the cell.

He went back to the window. Below, crossed by a long shadow, was a street, marked out on three levels, eight lanes of traffic —but there were no vehicles moving along any of them, the image was completely static. He stepped back and looked at himself in the glass. His nose was badly swollen, his complexion unhealthy, a large bruise on his neck from the nano-vampire bite. His shirt was dirty, the blood and streaks even darker, his trousers wrinkled, the cuffs would never achieve this geometric symmetry again. He reflexively smoothed out his clothes, though. He didn't have the cane. He had lost it in the hours of madness. He could use it now, to close his hand on something.

Well, yes. (He shrugged, took a breath.) Well, two possibilities: the police dug me out of the wreckage of the car —but that makes no sense, why would they bury me here, I should now be in the hospital, in the hands of medics and juridictors —or Marina and Vittorio imprisoned me, having eluded pursuit —but even that is not very likely: namely, how could they have escaped him?

But since I am here... Why are they imprisoning me? Ha, reasons enough. (He smiled gloomily at himself in the window.) If only because: because I tried to murder Vassone. Not me, of course, but the manager with the help of the motion editor. But from the outside, it is always just me. After all —what are these programs, if not my servants, far-reaching prostheses of my will? I could have clearly forbidden them. I could have said: no. It is not allowed. I did not say that.

Or really? My memory won't recall every word of our conversation now. Maybe I forbade him... But no, that's impossible, he wouldn't have broken an express prohibition.

But here began that chain of terrible suspicions. They had been pricking

him in the minivan, and later events had only intensified them. Nicholas knew little about OVR implants and software, but among his few certainties was this: namely, that it was impossible to enter someone else's implant without the consent of its owner. One hundred percent security was the basic criterion for each of the subsequent models. Who would agree to an implant if it threatened to turn him into a zombie? Even the manager himself confirms that such hacks are impossible.

So let's accept the more likely version and agree that Vittorio was not able to block my communication module.

However, the manager claims that it was blocked. Conclusion: the manager is lying.

But the manager can't lie. That's another certainty.

Conclusion: either the module was blocked in some other way, or the manager was previously patched in such a nasty way.

There's only one place and one time for both possibilities: Sneaky Fucker's isolation ward. I accepted the cobra on my body. I removed the protection. Sneaky Fucker asked so naturally, without insistence, it seemed like a completely obvious necessity, a routine in the sneaker's behavior with vaccinated customers...

Oh, what scenarios doesn't the imagination come up with...! For example:

Hedge sniffs out Chigueza, Langolian's sneakerheads track him down, and Hedge is presented with an offer he can't refuse. So he doesn't refuse it, so when the unhealthily nosy client visits him again, the cobra is waiting, full of Langolian venom...

Everything that's happened to me since I left Sneaky Fucker's villa is open to question.

The problem is that the value of such a hypothesis is essentially zero, since there's no way to falsify it. I have to deal with the way I dealt with the suspicion of monadic possession: regardless of the premises and evidence, proceed as if it weren't true.

It's hard, very hard, considering that at this point, I'm almost certain that

I'm in the power of some perfidious Mad Driver; that even if I erased every MUI and profile from my memory, the implants, it wouldn't give me the slightest guarantee of the reality of this room, these sunlights, even my own body. Every apparent action, every filtered stimulus...

It could still be true —Marina, the Shadow, the clinic, the assault —maybe; but it could be a complete lie; and anything in between. Check? How? Even if I had my skull opened and the nanomats surgically removed —that operation could also be an illusion.

Once I had a strong suspicion, I would live the life of Schrodinger's cat until I died: both real and pretend. That's all I needed: suspicion.

He pressed his forehead against the cold glass. That made him realize how sweaty he was. He wiped his skin with his sleeve. He felt it all with sickening clarity: the sweat, the cold of the window, the warmth of the sun, and the musty smell of the room, and the faint taste of paprika on his tongue, the pressure of the chair against his back, the weight of the rubble...

If Pascal lived in our times, he would bet on something else, draw different matrices. *You don't know whether this is life or a game, so always proceed according to the calculation of minimizing the costs of error, as if you were doing everything for real.* This is the commandment for the 21st century.

HE flexed his sixth finger. When the MUI menu opened, he hit BACK.

"Devil," he said, "I forbid you to take any action against Dr. Vassone."

"Unconditionally, sir?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it comes down to a choice: your life or hers..."

"After all, you can reduce every situation to such a choice, right? Did she put a gun to my head? You choked her. I forbid you. You will not open the motion editor without my express order. I will cancel the entire personal protection setup."

"As you command, sir. Everyone has the right to euthanasia."

Hunt turned away from the window for a moment and looked at Lucifer. The Devil stood in a "rest" position, hands clasped behind his back, looking at Nicholas, slightly tilted toward him, horns gleaming.

"Communications?" Hunt growled, turning back to the city.

"Unfortunately, sir."

Why was he getting rid of his phone so quickly? Here was another lesson. At any given time, for any field, at least two technologies should be maintained: the current one and its predecessor. This reduces the likelihood of getting stuck in a techno-evolutionary dead end.

"Open yesterday's scans for me."

"I don't have any OVR files from yesterday."

"What?"

"You were unconscious, sir."

"What the hell, how unconscious..."

"Sir...?"

"Wait a minute. The time stamp. He looked and gritted his teeth."

"You were unconscious for two and a half days" explained the Devil. "The substance that the Shadow Vittorio introduced into your bloodstream kept you in a coma. I could only monitor your bodily functions. If you want..."

"Open the scans from the assault on the clinic for me."

"Here you go."

Darkness and noise again. Where did Vittorio and Marina come from? Who was that man Hunt collided with? Vittorio? Where did the gas come from and who was the shooter? Even the most sophisticated graphic analyzer would not be able to pick out something from the image that was simply not there. Nicholas rewound the close-ups of the police forces several times, the people behind the barrier. He did not understand the police officers' behavior. If they had penetrated the clinic network so thoroughly that they had blocked its security

system —how on earth had they missed the back exit through which the Shadow had escaped? If Vittorio had indeed arranged for Marina to meet the local doctors, if he had been the middleman, then he had every right to know the layout of the rooms and even some hidden passages. But why didn't the police know them? More than that: Vittorio had expected it, he was quite certain that the police didn't know them.

A small logical fold.

Boom! It hit when they detonated the charges. Hunt watched the NYPD stormtroopers, in slow motion, jumping through the holes they had just punched into the interior of the blindingly white building. It was because of me, he decided. Because, it was hard to believe that it was just a coincidence that an operation against organized crime had been planned for that night. Somehow, they had ended up here behind me and Marina. How?

"How?"

"Most likely version: A&S tuned its satellite and tracked the paths of all the vehicles and individuals leaving the hotel during the critical time frame."

The moment the fugitives were spotted was not recorded; Hunt had his back to the roadblock, and when he turned around, the choppers were already bearing down on him. Now he recognized another lapse in logic: What right did the NYPD UCAVs have to shoot at unarmed suspects? What were these officers thinking, giving such orders? He looked at "those cops" even more closely, frame by frame, in near-limit sharpness, a slight zoom from the pixelation. That's when he saw him, looking over the hood of the SWAT van directly at Hunt and Marina, his hand half raised, saying something into space.

"Read it," Nicholas said.

The words deciphered from McFly's lip movements flashed and faded against the background. YES, SHIT, THEY. NOT YET, BUT ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE. COME ON. YES, THEY'LL GET THEM IN A MINUTE. LET THEM COME HERE WITH A PAD, THEY'LL HAVE TO BE REMOVED FROM THE CORONER'S THEN, HE'S GOT AN IMPLANT, I MEAN, HUNT, SO THEY COULD. He disappeared from Hunt's field of vision behind the car—and that was all for McFly's performance.

“Beautiful,” Hunt mumbled. “Wonderful. Wonderful. Fantastic. Fucking rocking.”

He sat down on the floor in the corner of the room and leaned against the wall.

It seemed to him that someone was saying something to him, he even tilted his head reflexively, but there was complete silence, the room was well-insulated. He could only hear his own breathing.

Lucifer leaned over him, worried.

“I am a corpse, my Devil, a corpse,” Nicholas told him.

“Sir...?”

“I don’t know what’s worse.”

“If I may suggest something...”

“You’ll turn off this psychoanalysis.”

“... It would be a good idea to check the default TV passwords, there is almost certainly a LEDscreen somewhere here, maybe still working, maybe with an outlet.”

“As you wish. Give me the list.”

The Devil handed him a piece of paper, Hunt started mechanically.

Nicholas couldn’t help but create scenarios of further developments, each more grim than the next, invariably ending with his death, when they had finally extracted what they needed from him. Because that was the only reason he was still alive: they wanted something from him.

Having reached two thirds of the list, he stopped because the room suddenly went dark: the window LED activated, displaying the website of a local provider.

“Sir.” The Devil puffed up with pride.

Hunt reluctantly got to his feet, because from this frog’s perspective he could see the LED screen in an almost illegible abbreviation. Standing up, he thought of the door and turned on his heel. It began to open silently, warm light

bursting from the crack. Marina entered. Vittorio stood in the doorway behind her, large, gloomy, all black in baggy linen clothes the color of ground graphite. In his straight hand he held a pistol aimed over Vassone at Nicholas —not a blade, but the angular gun he had used to shoot at himself in the clinic. Marina was short enough that there was no danger of her stepping into the line of fire, and she immediately stepped back to the right. A blast from such a cannon would be enough, Nicholas thought —and at that moment he remembered the shots he had received that fateful night. He had almost started feeling himself in front of them, on his shoulder, on his hip. Fear and cold anger seized him at the same time. The hard grip of the pistol in his hand, the certainty of the muscles arranged along the line of his arm, he could almost feel them. His fingers ran nervously over his shirt, buttoning it high under his chin. Where was the jacket? He glanced at the bed. No jacket.

Then he understood everything.

He exchanged clear glances with Marina. I know you know that I know. Controlled tension. To get the secret out.

He said in OVR:

“If my memory serves me right, I copied some behavioral polygraph. Be so kind as to fire it up.”

“At your service.”

At the same time, Marina spoke:

“That’s what it seemed to me, that you were no longer asleep... How are you feeling?”

He noticed that she was wearing the same or similar trousers and turtleneck as on Monday. If anyone, Marina Vassone was certainly not one of those women who don’t pay attention to her appearance.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Don’t come near me.”

“I’m not. What? He’s got me at gunpoint, he’ll blow my head off in the blink of an eye, what are you afraid of?” Then, quite calmly: “I won’t strangle you.”

“I’m not. Don’t come near me.”

The Devil chuckled. Marina’s nose grew half an inch longer.

Hunt grimaced.

“Change visualization,” he muttered in OVR.

“What?”

“At least something, hmm, less extravagant.”

Vassone’s face regained its normal appearance. Nicholas turned around and looked out the large window. It brightened up at least, as if he had changed MUI. He also immediately felt more confident. He leaned back against the window, folded his arms across his chest. Marina looked at him searchingly. Vittorio—Vittorio stood like a statue, not even blinking, and if he breathed at all, it was somehow completely imperceptible, shallow and slow.

On Marina’s left, a judge in a black robe raised a two-scale scale to the height of his head. On one scale, a green-black snake coiled, hissing and sticking out its fiery tongue, and on the other, rested a white flower (these are, unfortunately, the default symbols). The scales remained balanced.

All of this—the pose Nicholas had assumed, the forced distance from Marina, the judge, Vittorio’s presence, the gun in his hand—made it impossible, or at least extremely difficult, to defy the form. Now they were to follow each other, with the same inevitability with which day follows night: the mocking half-smile, the allusive non-expressions, the looks of ice, the angry silence, the cold fury, the ostentatious indifference.

They both remembered perfectly well how he had tried to murder her. This memory would stand behind every word and gesture from now on. But even if his life depended on it (and let’s be honest: it depends, it depends)—Nicholas would not be able to muster any explanations: that it wasn’t him, that it was the manager, that it was Baryshnikov, that it was the implant’s calculations... He would not tolerate such humiliation in front of a stranger; in front of anyone.

There is NEti and there are codes even stronger.

”Why are they chasing you?” she asked. “Why did they issue the order?”

What's your deal? How did you know? Who gave it to you? What are you playing for? Who's in the conspiracy?"

"What conspiracy?"

"Name them all."

"There's no conspiracy. Unless you think the plan of the Langolian strategists who corrupted you is one."

"Nobody corrupted me!" she snapped. "You've got everything: the knowledge, the program."

Ha, he thought sadly, I've come across as an eminence grise again.

"What knowledge?" he sighed. "What program?"

"You knew about the virus. He's that December, right? You knew about the Prayer, you had it in your pocket the whole time!"

"You were clearly not the worst informed either."

"I didn't know anything about December." (A flower heavier than a snake). "Who told you?"

Hunt shrugged.

"Nobody. I guessed. The code name had leaked to me from Washington gossip. I asked around. Only September came out." He told her about it in the words of the pheno-black from the Hacienda. She listened, leaning back, her shoulder blades resting against the wall. "So I began to wonder: what will be the next stage in the Monadic Wars, now that the balance between the new powers has been established? I associated it with what Schatz had said about the second type of Wars: mass, non-selective influence. Remember, I had the Estep lying on my desk, dreaming about it at night. What could be simpler, I reasoned, than to connect the RNAditive executive part of the Estep to September? What would we get then? A genotypically profiled virus of increased susceptibility to thought pressure, that's what. I even began to suspect it in the Asians. Maybe the Transvaal or Israel were supporting their attacks on Hong Kong and China in this way? That is, by exposing nations to suicidal economic trends."

"You suspected correctly," she snorted. "China responded to an open De-

cember. In a few weeks, it will reach the last hermits. The TV is constantly broadcasting warnings and recommendations from the Center for Infectious Diseases. Kill every animal you meet. Do not approach hospitals, clinics, prison cities. Bloody riots in prison cities. In a few days we will have something analogous to the British Riot Act of 1715, with no less severe sanctions. Any gathering beyond six is already a crowd. Any public religious practices are prohibited. In densely populated areas, true horror, there are the most savage, and they were the first to be taken over. Because December on the reserved genframe of designers came to us yesterday, the open one, on all the sculpted.“

“Who did you contact?”

“Vittorio was going out. He had to.”

“So you are most likely a carrier.”

“Yes.” (The flower is heavier). “You too.”

“Anyway, I have Fungus. Have you had the vaccine? I don’t want to. Besides, after December, it makes little sense: a gradation of rape.”

“Well, I don’t know. I somehow don’t...”

But he didn’t finish, because he suddenly realized that it wasn’t true. He shivered, frost ran through his bones, he reflexively rubbed his arms. December in the blood. Well, yes. I could feel it. Oh: like the sun beating down on my back. How do I know? Because Vittorio is watching. Why did I look back at the door then? That fear. Whose? Not Marina’s? Which impulse is mine?

Speak, speak, speak, as long as it’s quick, that’s also a mantra, it protects.

“And Prayer?” she asked. “Where did you get it?”

So he answered, quickly, without thinking, from the most shallow, the brightest thoughts:

“Someone sent it to me. Anselm, I think. I can’t open it. Did you manage to? You know what it is, right?”

“I helped put it together myself.” She looked away into the grey sky, but the judge didn’t react. “Anselm? Anselm couldn’t have had it. I don’t know how many copies of it exist, but really not many. It was Chigueva’s idea, she came

up with it after reading Schatz's second memorandum. Langolian already had his Fungus at that time, it was brought in as a dowry by two cognitive scientists whom she had bribed from Bridge, and it was only a matter of establishing profiles."

"But what kind of program is that anyway?"

"A kind of overlay for Fungus." She shrugged. She clapped her left shoe automatically against the wall with the sole of her left shoe. "It modulates the intensity and type of psychomeme emission induced by it. On the scale of a single mind, it doesn't do much—but the thing is intended for groups and entire societies."

He remembered Ronald Schatz in "Santuccio." *Imagine this, just imagine this...!* Someone actually imagined it.

"The secret cultivation of monads."

She shook her head.

"No, no. What would that achieve in the end? How many monads would there have to be? Prayer works differently: it saturates the mind with specific psychomeme structures, exerting subliminal pressure. For example, the correlation of a specific sound, shape or taste with a feeling of satisfaction or aversion. After all, Fungus itself does not determine the "content" of the inhibitory secretions, and there remains room for manipulation here. If these emissions are synchronized in a sufficiently large number of fungi-infested... You understand... The philosopher's stone of memetic engineering, the Holy Grail of marketing."

"Direct control of consumption vectors." He saw it clearly, as if in a computer animation. "Yes. The Prayer's Controller could promote or sink any single product. It's hard not to buy a car of this particular make, when you dream about its logo at night. The whole city, the whole nation, dreams about it. Damn it, that Schatz is a plague...! That too..."

"Stay back!"

"Okay, okay. What did you need Chigueza for in all this?"

"Tests. EEGs taken over by monads. Before Estep, it was the only source of data. Prayer is very flexible, but you can't write a program completely blind."

dly. Nicholas. Who did you tell? Who knew? Why were we blacklisted? I —I understand; but you?”

“I have no idea. Maybe McManamara used natural pressure... I don’t know.”

“Who is in the conspiracy?”

“Conspiracy! Give me a break.”

“Why did you come to me with this?”

“Because I found out about your connections with Langolian. I was right, or maybe not?”

“Why did you call the jurdas?”

“He attacked me. What’s left for me? Do you have any complaints? After all, it was an attack on you.”

“Did you leave any information somewhere? A trust file?”

“No. Nothing.”

“What did you want to do next?”

“Use you. What else? You were dating the invisible Chigueza.”

“Good.”

She still didn’t look at Hunt. Slap-slap her shoe against the wall. Nicholas looked from her to Vittorio, who had clearly forgotten that he was a human being. He was looking for the impulse to murder in Hunt and he didn’t feel any. Which, however, was no proof, considering Fungus: Vittorio could already be planning a murder.

So he pulled himself together, controlled his breathing. At that moment, however, Marina raised her eyes at him, probably touched by Nicholas’s nervousness (after all, her Fungus did not protect her) —and at the last moment changed her line:

“I do not understand how Prayer could enter someone else’s Fungus.”

“How did Vittorio block your implant?” Vassone mumbled back, lost in

thought again.

“Exactly, how?”

”How do you think is the Toulouse 10 made?” The scales did not move in the judge’s hand.

Is it possible? (Nicholas wanted to believe it very much). Well, it has a semblance of probability —at least for a layman like me.

But how can I be sure that she really said it?

This spiral of suspicions has no end...

Then Marina clearly made a decision, because she tore herself away from the wall and moved energetically toward the door. The interrogation was over. Hunt tensed.

She stopped at the threshold, looked back at him. He stood there in silence. With two quick movements, he adjusted his cuffs, straightened up. He waited.

“Why?” she asked. Face, eyes, voice, everything absolutely expressionless, but Nicholas felt that short jolt of salty anger.

“There. My implant manager has a highly developed protective instinct. I didn’t disconnect his motion editor. Probably all by oversight. Although... who knows.”

She nodded to him.

She slapped the Shadow’s outstretched hand. He lowered it, put away his weapon and retreated into the depths of the white corridor. Hunt was furious. He jumped toward the door.

“What, do you believe me?” he growled angrily. “You should have hooked me up to some machine, that Shadow of yours would have figured something out by now, how do you know I wasn’t lying to you from beginning to end...”

“I know; you weren’t lying. The Shadow figured it out. While you were sleeping, he synthesized and administered the serum to you. You can’t say a single word that isn’t true.”

“Exactly!”

“You’ll believe it in a moment. Oh, and if you need to go to the bathroom, knock, Vittorio will take you.”

“Why are you...”

She slammed the door shut.

For a long moment, the doctor’s characteristic cool amusement fought for the better with the malarial anger. Then Mushroom prevailed, and Hunt was left alone with his rage.

THAT was on Thursday; and they didn’t leave the office building until Saturday evening.

During that time, he was browsing news services on a window, playing back the OVR files saved in the implants’ memory, bantering with the Devil, creating scenarios of defeat and humiliation. He also tried to coax Vittorio’s tongue—because he didn’t see Marina again until Saturday evening.

Vittorio, if he answered at all, was in short, broken sentences, without ostentatious reluctance, but with even more insulting indifference.

“What will you do with me now?”

“We definitely won’t let you go.”

“To the Grave?”

“For now, we’re waiting.”

“For what?”

“For an opportunity.”

So on, quick questions and even quicker answers, it seemed that he simply couldn’t tire him, irritate him, or throw him off balance in any way.

In Vittorio’s prolonged presence, an overwhelming calm slowly descended upon Nicholas, the natural silence of an eternally bound element.

But Hunt remembered his own: the turn of his head, the small laser eye, the angular barrel, his dead face, the oily pupils; he would never forget that.

Fear? Of course, the worst kind, organic, irrational, in reflexes and grimaces; especially afterwards and before. He mastered it with great effort. He knew well that he was a coward—but the day he allowed himself to show fear in public would be Nicholas Hunt's last day.

He pestered the Shadow all the more brazenly, even when he brought him food.

This opportunity they had been waiting for—they intended to hide for a while in one of the closed enclaves under New York. It was not a constitutional enclave, completely isolated: you cannot join a cultural sect "for a while," and they do not take people off the street, nor do such enclaves, by the way. However, Vittorio had contacts among the enclavists and managed to buy all three of them for half a year for some astronomical sum. Under false names, of course—the money was, among other things, for a guarantee of a complete information blockade, which all closed enclaves give to their permanent members, as they consistently refuse to recognize the authority of local law.

Where did the money come from? After all, all their accounts were frozen, and besides, the enclavists would not accept a transfer that so many eyes would follow anyway. From Vittorio's accounts? After the performance in front of the clinic, he was certainly tracked down. People collect old prints for such eventualities. Books are the only security these days, and Marina was carrying an entire library of first editions in her two bags, worth more than gold. They disappeared along with the minivan in the clinic. All she had left was Milton and Newton, hidden somewhere in the city during Vassone's earlier escape preparations, before the news of her son's death reached her. Vittorio must have gone for them. He returned with the books and December.

Oh, right, the clinic. How did they escape? The Shadow didn't say it clearly, but his connections to the underground must have gone far beyond fleeting contacts as a client. He knew about the tunnel and knew how to blow up the supporting wall of the building (with a shot?). That was the bang Nicholas heard as he ran: a trap prepared by gangsters, the final safeguard in their escape. Then? How did they escape the helicopters? In response to that question, Vittorio just tapped his forehead with his finger. Since his face, as usual, expressed nothing, Hunt at first thought the Shadow was mocking him. But then, alone with the

Devil in a cell overlooking the city, he came to the conclusion that Vittorio was indicating the implant in this way. Yes, the helicopters were unmanned and certainly adapted to control via OVR, and he, the Shadow, thanks to Vassone knew a way to perform non-invasive break-ins.

Only when asked about his contract with Marina, about the terms of the contract, did Vittorio remained silent.

Since the building (probably the entire district) had been auctioned off or was currently awaiting auction, in any case no one was actively managing it and no one was currently renting usable space in it —all systems were operating at the lowest energy level. For Nicholas, this meant, among other things, cold, dark and muggy nights —but he was more bothered by the limitation of the local network's information service. The local provider had closed all paid lines for this node, leaving only two public ones and a dozen or so of the largest free ones, overloaded with mandatory advertisements, with extremely poor customization options and a completely blocked interactive output. If it weren't for this blockade, Hunt could have, after first enduring half an hour of advertising smack, opened a free call to any number in New York or —also for free —sent up to 2GB to open accounts.

Another thing is that he wouldn't really have anyone to turn to anyway, not after all those services announced him by name, face and DNA as a fugitive agent of a foreign intelligence agency, responsible —together with another traitor, Marina S. Vassone —for the Crisis (in the course of those few days he earned a capital letter) and the Plague (which was already the Plague in the initiating news). Media murder, no doubt —but how vulgar! After all, subtlety has always been valued here. Anyone can declare the victim an embezzler, a psychological rapist, an FBI informer. But killing a person with compliments alone... oh, that's the true art of memetic assassins! That's style and form! Meanwhile, what: through the head with a club. Nevertheless, the effect is the same: a cold corpse; nothing will help.

At first, Nicholas thought: Imelda, Anselm, mother, father.

The second instinct was the one born of reason. Imelda? What could she do? Besides, he's definitely on the FBI and juridictors' list anyway. Anselm? Damn, he was probably the one who sent me that Prayer, security caught him, hence the smear campaign and McFly to supervise the execution. Mother? Also under surveillance. The only thing I could convey to her was a warm "I am innocent"

but she doesn't believe in my guilt, and Father won't believe me anyway? Where the hell did Father come to mind? He's been dead for years.

As for the Crisis and the Plague, he knew even more about them than he wanted to, and separate sections were devoted to them on the websites. The crisis was already affecting the economies of all countries and alliances. The monadic powers in the IEW earned themselves the nickname "crocodiles of the crash" from commentators —and even they (Hong Kong, Transvaal, Israel, Libra Inc.) lost in the overall calculation, only significantly less than the rest. What else distinguished them: their strategies were surprisingly offensive. Infoeconomic analysts didn't understand this and were babbling vaguely about "new defense games." Hunt, who knew the secret of the mind, knew better: this was Yalta post-IEW. Right before his eyes.

Thanks to lightning-fast air connections, the Plague had covered the entire Earth in forty-eight hours. There were images from every continent, even Antarctica. Scientists with the strangest names and unlikely accents spoke about the virus with a mixture of authority and uncertainty, as if taken straight from last century's HIV lectures by virologists. They had managed to select a very extensive December RNAdit. But what exactly was being edited here—they didn't know. Of course, Hunt sneered, how could they know, after all, nothing about the step had leaked yet.

He ordered Lucifer to use the rich data attached to the conference files to perform a simple trend extrapolation. The Devil began to elaborate. pointlessly over some Kaestep, unfolding entire DNA maps before Hunt's eyes... He had to repeat the order to shut up.

He found one piece of news in the outdated news that really chilled him. He wanted to check how extensive the investigation into his case had been, and spelled out the names of all the people who could possibly have been involved in it. In this way, he came across a two-minute report from the plane crash. The image had been taken from a helicopter, because the place where the plane crashed was in an enclave that did not allow sworn journalists inside and forbade the publication of internal scans. A sloping column of pitch-black smoke was shooting into the evening sky. The crater, a starry scab of metal, slag and rubble, actually covered only one property. The number of dead was given —seven— and the number of injured —two. The property was rented by Mr. Marius Hedge.

Nicholas rewound this report several times. The probable cause of the crash

was a malfunction of the on-board computers. The plane, an old DC-10, hit the house straight. Nothing was left of the garden and the firework trees of Sneaky Fuck. Hunt thought he could still smell his incense. Nights in the unheated room on the twentieth floor of a disused office building were very cold, shivers racked his body. He turned off the LEDscreen, wrapped himself in white foam torn from the floor.

HE played scans from the conference.

“Thought as a computer,” said Yince Li, a twenty-two-year-old professor of cognitive science from MIT (a government department, less than 10% of Microsoft’s shares). “We start with gene algorithms based on COX. If Ronald Schatz’s hypotheses about excluding thought from the limitations of matter physics are confirmed, we get a logic machine that beats quantum computers hands down, with potentially an infinitely large memory. Just in case, I remind you that we do not know the level of granularity of thought. Attempts to quantize it undertaken by Dr. Vassone, contrary to popular belief, did not yield final results: we only know axon reflections. There are no equations that represent either energy or position. Anything could turn out to be possible.”

“In the meantime,” continued Li “we should roughly define the necessary conditions for using a psychomeme computer. The operations would have to be performed on some isolated fragment of the mind that would not interfere with either its cosmic radiation or the random reflections of neurosystems. Space again comes into play. Maybe not even the Moon, but even more distant outposts. This will undoubtedly increase the costs.”

“However, the biggest problem,” sighed the cognitive scientist “will be, hmm, the interface. Mechanical precision and control are needed, certainty about each and every psychomeme —and what about this? Telepaths, lunatics, possessed people. Such methods are out of the question, they are makeshift, embarrassing home-made work. We must have the ability to precisely program, reprogram and read minds. No human brain will guarantee us this —not because it is human, but because it is a brain. Too complex. A holistic, irreducible structure. It is simply impossible to obtain monochromatic reflections in this way.”

“So?”

“So it’s time to get to work, ladies and gentlemen. Does anyone here remember the so-called ‘Fountain of Youth’? It was a GenSym project, they started it a bit in Zambian labs before completely destroying it in the IEW. Their goals were different, they started with artificially growing an analogue of fetal brain tissue—but we can use the results of their research. I don’t know who currently owns the rights, it seems some Swiss great-grandson of IG Farben devoured them. You can buy them back. In particular, we will need their patent for the synthesis of neuronal matrices. As I see it, they would be ideal discrete psychomeme generators for our psychocomputer. A dendrite impulse, excited by an electronic signal, would change the quantum state of the thought cell. Macromatrices would be responsible for more complicated commands. After their appropriate reconfiguration, it would be possible to burn entire bitmaps at once.”

“The reading?”

”Yes. Here we come to the key issue. We will need aesthetic matrices: telepathic neuromachines. If the above is confirmed, and Professor Krasnov makes the results of his research available, their construction should not pose any major difficulties. We would then obtain bilateral thought modulators. All we would lack to run a psychomemetic computer would be the appropriate software. I guarantee the best software specialists.”

A savage from the back rows:

“How can we know if someone somewhere hasn’t already constructed and launched such a psychomemetic computer? In fact, it seems very likely to me, it is hard to assume that we are the first to realize the situation and decide to use thought in this way.”

“Yes, it is likely, Mr...?”

“Jarne, NASA. So I wonder why not, let’s say, a million years ago? It seems to me that in this desperate hunt for neuromonads, we have a greater chance of encountering still executing algorithms of alien psychomemetic computers. Honestly, How can we tell the difference? It could be a machine after all.”

“What?”

“No thoughts”

Crowd in the Streets

THIS is Mr. Julius Qurant, and this is his wife, Mrs. Colleen Qurant. They'll save your life, Nicholas, so don't make it difficult.

Over the course of three days, Hunt had figured out why Vassone had decided to pay for him too and take him with her to the enclave. It was simple: because it was the least radical decision. Marina could always order the Shadow to kill him, and the Shadow would kill him. Resurrections, on the other hand, required completely different specialists. He would have done the same in her place —irreversible decisions, that's what he had always feared.

Over the course of three days, Nicholas had also understood this: there was no going back for him, and not only to Real Life (forget it!), but even to that secret existence in the shadow sphere that he had led so far, in the NSA and then in the Team. So he had experienced two deaths. The first, smaller, when he was banished from the gardens of power, the second, final, because public, when he was murdered in the media.

In fact, he understood it at the same moment when he saw himself on the LEDscreen signed as a wanted criminal. But in order to accept this state also subconsciously, in order to believe, he needed a day, a night and a day. Then he felt a strange relief. Everything was gone, so there was nothing to be nervous about anymore. He cackled to Lucifer: "What am I going to worry about... Nicholas Hunt is screwed. From now on, call me Nick." "*No problemo*, Nick."

However, when he stood in front of a glazed window on a bright day, with a large city at his feet, admittedly not at such heights as in the senator's skyhouse

or in his apartment in Manhattan, but after all it was always the perspective of the *Urbemensch*; so as he stood and watched, an irritating shiver arose in him, some kind of shudder of the internal organs of the soul, as if someone had stuck a hand inside him and now they was tearing, twisting, pulling, shaking, an unstoppable fury of resentment and thirst for revenge. Unconsciously, Hunt clenched his fists, bowed his head, bit his mustache. Nicholas was eaten away by the memory of that moment from a few days ago, on Sunday afternoon, when, fully aware of all the consequences —because he had expected the worst —Hunt decided to throw himself into the abyss. So he threw himself, damn it! He had found the courage and he did!

He turned away from the window, all sweaty, and let out a breath, relaxed his muscles, and laughed for the hell of it. In the next life I'll be even stupider..!

When Marina introduced them, they stood —the enclavists and Hunt —against opposite walls of an empty conference room, but Colleen Quirant immediately looked up at Nicholas and muttered:

"That's no argument for him, it seems he's already put his life on the line. Did he try to throw himself somewhere?" she asked Vittorio.

The Shadow shook his head.

Sympathy began to rise in Hunt. He glared at Vassone and the enclavists. Which one? Which one?

"Spare me," he snapped "I'm not suicidal, it's too much trouble without Kevorkians."

Marina glanced at Vittorio.

"Is it still working?"

The Shadow rocked his open hand: maybe.

"Indeed," Nicholas addressed the Devil in OVR "does this serum still work?"

"If you're not sure, what can I tell you?" the prince of darkness was offended. "Lie."

"We can't just get in a car and drive." Julius Quirant was saying meanwhile "because all civilian vehicles are automatically blocked at intersections, the

computer would park us after a few meters. If not, even worse, we would immediately have police UCAVs on our backs. It's also not very possible to march in a tight group through the city. The quarantine order makes it all very difficult. I see two options now: either we wait for the dust to settle, which will take another three or four days, or we go at night, separated.

Media experts were talking about three or four days. The main problem was supplies. The army took over transport, but since all supermarkets, restaurants, McDonald's were closed —food had to be delivered to doorsteps. People should stay at home, in separate rooms if possible, and as far away from each other as possible. Of course, this wasn't a perfect solution either —what about the slums, what about the old, cramped housing estates, what about the densely populated ethnic neighborhoods? But the point was to prevent the formation of street crowds. Hunt had seen the reports from Brooklyn, those bloody massacres. There, few had decided to get grafted. Millions of people without Fungus, heads together... At first, he had thought that people would get used to it in time, that it would somehow calm down —now he saw that quarantine was the last straw for a megapolis like New York.

"Let's go now," he said. "When this all blows up, we'll have even fewer chances. Imagine what's going to happen here."

Colleen and Marina shrugged simultaneously and in the same way. Julius grimaced and clapped his hands three times. Colleen looked at her husband and he slapped him hard on both sides. Hunt's face burned, he rubbed it reflexively.

"If we go now," Vittorio continued "we have to expect to be recognized. Night, not night, it's impossible to cross the city without getting caught by a few thousand cameras. Besides, we won't make it in one day anyway. The subway is closed, taxis are automatic and for single passengers only, buses are not running, the police or guards check your hands every block.

"They passed."

"They were going the other way."

"We're not as famous as you," Colleen panted. She was now pacing like crazy back and forth along the shorter wall of the hall.

"I need to think," Marina muttered and left.

At the Devil's urging, Hunt asked Julius:

"I don't know if there's any point in running away to your enclave... Once it starts —why should it bypass you? Will you defend yourself?"

"Yes," Qurant replied curtly, and Nicholas felt the hard certainty of the word on his tongue.

Vassone returned after about two minutes.

"Okay, let's go."

Vittorio immediately replied:

"Change clothes. Loose, to deform the silhouettes, preferably long coats. Faces —something to jam their filters —It's not a problem for me, but you and this one here... Hair, pigment. Features."

He finally went to get coats. The Devil and Hunt were very surprised that he left Vassone unattended like that. Nicholas, of course, had no intention of attacking Marina, nor did he even think of informing anyone about his situation —but Vassone couldn't be wearing that. So why did she send the Shadow away? (Vittorio certainly wouldn't have left on his own initiative; she had to give him an order to do so.) Evidently, her mind was lost. Didn't Black want to get vaccinated? The Toulouse 10 Fungus would have given her at least some minimal protection. It certainly didn't immunize them against the influence of thought —Hunt could see that in himself —but it also prevented them from going into overdrive like Colleen Qurant.

When he asked why the Qurants hadn't also injected Toulouse, Julius replied curtly:

"The constitution of the enclave forbids it."

They were ready before dusk. The coats Vittorio had provided were too big for both Nicholas and Marina, their tails reaching the ground, their hands completely hidden in the sleeves. They camouflaged their figures, that was for sure. Vittorio had also brought a full cosmetic set. (He hadn't bought it, he had probably just looted it. Hunt didn't investigate.) He depilated Nicholas's skull and his entire face, except for his eyebrows. Then came the spray, the muscle-modeling injections, the eye membranes... When he looked in the mirror, he

didn't see Nicholas Hunt, Nicholas Hunt had gone to hell.

With Vassone, there was less effort, there wasn't much that could be done here except dye her hair black, slightly curve the line of the lips and widen the nostrils. She was too perfectly sculpted, any greater deformities would be conspicuous as artificial.

Marina gave Hunt back his jacket, along with its contents, which he put into the many pockets of his coat. The Prayer disks once again reminded him of Anselm. She said that it wasn't him, that he couldn't... Who then?

The Qurants watched these preparations in silence. Another thing is that they were sitting so close together that they probably didn't need to say anything.

After that, everyone was silent, looking out the large windows of the conference room and waiting for dusk. The Qurants and Marina were sitting on folding chairs (Marina had pulled out an LEDpad from somewhere and unrolled it, and now, staring at its stiffened screen, was waving her white-gloved hand in the air), while Vittorio was frozen by the door. Only Hunt was moving around the room, constantly stroking the bare skin of his skull with a long movement of his left hand, with two fingers bent back. He stopped when he saw his reflection in the glass and recognized the venomous visual meme from the latest Fruito campaign in this gesture.

In OVR, he argued with the Devil:

"As a last resort, they can even enter by force. Theoretically, the enclaves are still subject to the jurisdiction of the courts of the United States. In reality, I should flee in the opposite direction: east, across the Atlantic."

"For now, there's no point in even trying. First, would you have to get a new cashchip and cut your DNAM. Vassone had planned all this well for herself, she didn't go to this clinic blindly. In the long run, this is the only chance."

"All it takes is for one of the enclavists to call the FBI."

"You won't get anywhere with this cashchip, Nick," the Devil kept repeating.

It's true: cashchips, in addition to their function as non-debit payment cards, played the role of universal identifiers within the meaning of the Clinton Act

of 1996, originally aimed against illegal immigrants, which nevertheless laid the first legal foundations for a nationwide ID card system. The system was created in the aughts. Then, when after the transition to cashless circulation of money, cashchip implants became a mass custom, the medium was unified. The system thus incorporated, among others, the standards of the Alien Identification Program, the National Machine Readable Document Program, the License Identification System, the National Registration Identity Card and UnoCard, becoming the basis of all information operators; in recent years even medical corporations have begun to switch their medallions to cashchips. No one planned standardization; as usual —the direction was indicated by the market vectors.

He instinctively rubbed the back of his right hand, pressed with his thumb. There was —between the bones —a small, hard capsule. He can tear it out. But why? It's not enough. To escape, he needs a new one.

"Escape," that's what he thought, that's what he said.

"Escape from New York!"

"Everything has already been done," agreed the Devil, the ultimate post-modernist (the world's libraries were cached).

However, even after committing the media murder on him, Nicholas had more reasons to surrender to the juridictors than to escape. What was the worst they could do to him? They wouldn't convict him, not without evidence, and they didn't have it, because in fact he hadn't betrayed anyone, there probably wouldn't even have been a trial, the juridictors would have settled the matter amicably through the Jesuits. True, Hunt would have been unemployed, worthless, a forever tainted outcast —but how much better off was he as a fugitive?

But someone-somewhere-sometime issued an order for his immediate elimination (*post factum* probably wouldn't find out who) —and now it was an escape from death. Characteristically, Hunt didn't even he wondered who had ordered this execution and why. It didn't matter. The reasons for most decisions remained unknown or at least unclear within the institutional neurosystem anyway; and where the impulse was born in it —that too was not subject to interpolation. Hunt had witnessed fateful decisions being made in the way described by the hacienda's pheno-black —and even as a witness, he couldn't tell who had actually spoken the first word and who had given the final blessing.

Following Vittorio, they left the conference room and began to descend twenty floors down an unlit, shadowy staircase (the elevator was out of order, of course). The Qurants and Marina stumbled a few times before they had increased the distance between them to a dozen or so steps. Hunt felt it too: the stimuli misleading the body, false movements. He had to focus on the next steps. Thousands, tens of thousands of people were coming and going through here. The same algorithms, executed in the same way... The Thinking was pressing. Baryshnikov would have fixed it, but Nicholas had had enough of motion editors for now.

On the first landing he passed, he again felt something biting into his calf muscle. He sped up, almost catching up with Colleen, just to get out of this zone as quickly as possible.

On the ground floor, they established a tactic. Or rather, Vittorio established one.

"I'll go first. Don't approach without my sign. Distances of at least five meters, with smaller ones starting in programs recognizing the defaults of the "group." Especially you and him —this referred to Marina and Nicholas —should not be registered together. I, and only I, deal with the outposts and machines. It is better to talk than to walk in silence, but no names, proper names. First pair: you and you. Second pair: you and you. Do not run under any circumstances. Questions?"

There were no questions, although Nicholas did indeed have a couple, but he was speechless at the sight of what was happening to the Shadow's face. Before Vittorio finished speaking, his physiognomy, the color of his skin —underwent a complete change. He was at once a chubby black man with a short afro haircut.

"Is that you?" Hunt asked Lucifer. "In my kingdom, all shells respect TP," the Devil was offended. Apparently the Shadow really was changing. "How does he do it?" "Nano on a cellular level, well other? Quite brutal. Naturally, such tissue reconstruction.." "Okay, okay."

"We're leaving."

Vittorio came out, Hunt came out with Colleen, Marina came out with Julius.

Both Qurants were carrying sports bags. Collen threw hers at Nicholas.

"Here, it'll look more natural."

"What?"

The bag was quite heavy. He slung it over his shoulder.

They marched in the shadow of a parallel overpass, the roadway and sidewalks empty as far as the eye could see; the ghost towns of overcrowded New York tended to be eerie. Despite heavy security, the buildings were inhabited by the homeless during bad weather, and it took citywide corporate actions to get them back in order. But the owners of these unprofitable properties rarely allowed themselves such expenses. Sooner or later, Hunt calculated, glancing anxiously around the shadows of the street canyon, and then we'd see what December was capable of.

Then he cursed and stepped away from Colleen.

She glanced at him suspiciously.

"Are you a Satanist?"

"Huh? Oh, no, that's my MUI."

"Peculiar."

"I just happened to come here and... got used to it."

He noticed that after all that chemical modeling of facial muscles, he was lisping a bit. He cleared his throat, moved his jaw, pinched his cheek.

"That's not good," Mrs. Qurant was shaking her head. "That's how you raise your aesthetic tolerance for evil."

He looked astonished.

"You're joking." But he could tell she wasn't joking.

"Don't you understand?" she pressed. "It's subject to the same laws of memetic engineering as advertising, politics, marketing, or artistic fashion. By accepting the aesthetics of evil, you take the first step toward accepting evil itself. Images. Words. Melodies. Shapes. How did it happen that you chose this parti-

cular visualization? Associations don't come out of thin air. I mean... I wanted to say..."

"They do now, so what's the difference? Besides, I'm telling you: it was an accident."

"The kind of accident that guides the consumer's hand in choosing between product A and product B?"

"What is it?" he got irritated. "It's my implant, my shell, what's it to you?"

She sighed. she stopped his hand in mid-motion, raising in a gesture of resignation.

"Before, I worked in memetics, it's my hobby."

"Before? Is it some fundamentalist sect, this enclave?"

"No, no, no way."

"Really? Hmm, what do we have here in your statute..." Lucifer blew out smoky letters in rapid bursts. "Outside of NEti, lifelong marriage contracts, corporal punishment, numerous invasions of privacy, ban on neural connections, drug prohibition, it could go on for a long time. To tell the truth, this is my hobby: religious and cultural sects."

"We are not a sect."

"It's hard to tell the difference. You see (not that I want to offend you), there are many people who desperately need an external code, any kind of code, the stricter the better —because they are simply too weak to cope on their own. The world that gives them so much freedom and forces them to make so many choices is like a complicated labyrinth of temptations for them, they get lost, they go from light to light, they can no longer stick to any direction. Deep down they are terrified. They will buy a map from anyone. They dream of the world as a straight corridor between two high walls. No crossroads. Since we live in an age of absolute freedom of choice, there are plenty of such children lost in the dense forest. Whoever takes them by the hand and leads them and spansks them often will make them happy."

"Good. A bit from the Grand Inquisitor, a bit from Sartre, but good."

"I really didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't." (But he felt something else.) "I hear things like that all the time. This memotrend had become established years ago: escape from freedom and so on. You must have swallowed it."

As they crossed the intersections, they looked hungrily in both directions along the ravines. They saw the lights, saw the advertisements, saw even the shadows of movement, on this level and above, on the spiderwebs of the overpasses—but they didn't see people. They walked in silence, because there was absolutely no sound background for the city. Night, not night, they should have heard it: the hum and bustle ground in mechanical lungs. Or at least its echo. Meanwhile, they still hadn't left the area of the old financial center and could hear only their own footsteps and the wind.

Dejected, Hunt looked back at Colleen, who had clearly slowed down. She was blinking with watery eyes, breathing deeply. Oh, damn it all, Nicholas thought. We'll just run away anywhere on foot! No point. Sooner or later they'll recognize us. Better to sit down and wait for the inevitable.

"To the other side!" the Devil yelled. "Cross the street!"

Nicholas shrugged, adjusted his bag, went over to Colleen and, taking her by the elbow, led her to the opposite sidewalk. Here she pulled away from him, rubbing her eyes.

He shuddered.

"What was that?" he asked, looking around in all directions.

"God knows. I think some junkie froze to death there one winter."

He saw that Marina and Julius were also already crossing the street. Vittorio looked back and slowed down for a moment, but kept walking.

"How?"

"Okay, okay, let's keep going."

But from now on, he kept looking at her out of the corner of his eye, observing her carefully from a distance of three or four meters, absolutely mandatory under December.

"It gets worse," she answered the unasked question. "Some streets are impossible to pass through at all. I don't know what happened there. Zones of madness. The Guard is gradually blocking them, but they won't relocate people. This is a city; it's definitely better in the suburbs. If there's a choice, it's safer to walk on the overpasses, the aerial promenades."

"That makes me wonder....," Nicholas began slowly, looking back at Qurant, who was discussing something fiercely with the black-haired Marina.

"What?"

"Why did you come for us in the first place? What, Vittorio doesn't know the address?"

"Who?"

"Oh, excuse me. But tell me: why?"

She was clearly confused. She wondered what to say. In the next dozen or so steps, he came within arm's reach of her.

"No!" she got offended, moving further to the left, toward the concrete wall of an abandoned office building.

But Nicholas had already caught on.

"This is your private agreement, huh? Behind the others' backs. You want to smuggle us in, right?"

"Oh, come on, Mr. Hunt. What crimes have you really committed, I ask?"

Well, one for sure: the crime of courage.

Then they started meeting people. As they went deeper and deeper into the real New York, the buildings came back to life. It was true that the streets were relatively empty, they saw more helicopters and UCAVs than cars—but they could tell the degree of density just by the lights in the tall windows. The first Guard post they encountered consisted of two women in ceremonial uniforms. They were standing by a KVAV parked across the roadway, looking at the sky. A voice boomed from invisible loudspeakers urging people to stay in their homes and not gather. Probably text from a computer, word modules somehow did not fit the situation. Empty cars were parked in neat rows by the sidewalks behind

the intersections. They shouted warnings at each other as various haunters walked along their roofs, waving Bibles, Korans, T-shirts with religious prints, and holo-flashlights loaded with icons of the Apocalypse. These were probably already deep in thought. He saw more and more lunatics —the prophets were still somehow human, but these drooling lunatics with empty stares, who crawl on concrete, gallop on all fours, bite metal, mutilate each other's bodies... they are more like animals, at least on the level of thought: non-human creatures, beasts. Whose psychomemes are in them —Nefeleas or, for example, ants? Passed through the human brain and sensory system, contaminated with deep structures, they still produce pointless procedures at the output. The beasts eat their own fingers. They jump into the air and fall on their faces, not using their hands. Or they use their hands: they wave them in all directions, as if trying to tear them off with the help of centrifugal force. They tear clothes with their teeth, bang their heads against car bodies, defecate while running. The cars were screaming, flashing their lights, probably sending urgent reports to their juridictors, but somehow no one was interested, the corporate helicopters didn't show up. (Weren't those guards looking out for air support?) Hunt imagined how much work the juridictors had to do these days, how many summonses, how many cases. Another thing was that the courts probably weren't working at all —he doubted whether twenty people gathered in one room were currently able to carry out any logical process to the end, even if they were all under Fungus. Yet most of these summonses undoubtedly belonged to the category of crimes not threatened with public prosecution, and normally the Legal insurer would be obliged to catch these devastators, looters and hooligans, unbridled street gangsters and aggressive haunters, bring them to court, pay the prosecutor or appoint one of their own, and carry out the entire prosecution. The juridictors' logo will cease to serve its purpose if such things continue to go unpunished. After all, why else do people pay such high and ever-increasing premiums to their insurance companies? Because premiums are rising and will continue to rise as Congress is forced to abandon mandatory charges in cases of increasingly serious crimes. However, the juridictors' staff and resources were not designed for such global disasters. Nor were the police, for that matter. Apart from these two guardswomen, Nicholas did not notice any representatives from law enforcement forces. He certainly could not count on mounted police; apparently all their horses had been put down. There must have been problems with the Guard's mobilization as well —such groupings posed a threat in themselves. Army or no Army, Fungus or no Fungus, it made no difference to the Crowd.

He knew because he had convinced himself of this on his own thoughts. They were approaching a cross street. Unsculpted homeless people in heavy rags were running out from around the bend. Vittorio stopped and raised his hand. So the other four stopped too. Hunt, turning, caught his own reflection in the bookstore window. The light was coming from outside, and Nicholas's silhouette flowed out of the darkened premises like a corpse from under black ice. His dark cloak made him a misty ghost, only his albino-pale face was clearly reflected. Vittorio's cosmetics had done their job: born and designed by the sculptors, a pheno-creole, Hunt had transformed into a bald vampire with a touch of Mongolian blood. He smiled. Yaaa! Those teeth, my God. Without a mustache, the line of his mouth seemed to signal laziness and melancholy rather than jovial cunning. Hu-hu-hu! What is this? Why am I not dying of fear here? There are cameras everywhere, this street is probably even under NEti, police filters could catch me at any moment, McFly will fly in with the feds, they will shoot me to pieces —and here I am, having a conversation with an enclavist, grinning at a window. After all, is this Fungus protecting me, or not? I am certainly much less pressured than those without Toulouse —but was that the point? The monster in the window was getting bigger and bigger. Can you look yourself in the eye? No, at most in the eye. When they say they are looking into your eyes, in fact they are staring somewhere above the bridge of the nose. Hunt was looking into the vampire's left eye. It did not blink. The pupil behaved strangely: now it was getting bigger, now it was curling up like a lens to a point of even higher darkness. Coldness on the forehead —before he realized it, when he pressed his face to the window. Now the eye was looking at him. Thud, thud, thud, he heard every tiny twitch of his eyeball. Darkness was sewing itself under, If only now... He thrust his hand into the darkness, felt for the ghost's skull. Lower. With his thumb. Puff! One eye, then the other. Now the darkness turned. It enveloped him in form, slick, hard, forcing him to move. The cloak transmitted its waves. First, second, third: mortal terror. Then: run! He threw himself forward, he threw himself backward, they pressed him, pushed him, pulled him, he had to run somewhere, just farther, they slaughtered his family, robbed him, took his food, broke his legs; how will he escape since God how it hurts is it blood something is flowing they are tearing out hair where fingers are cold cold get me out of but why not who not tire on hand old bones won't hold I have to give birth to this child they are chasing me they are chasing me I can't breathe something is stuck in my throat water ice oh don't trample on me me too I also want to get out of this wreck fire fire run broken legs how maybe I haven't eaten for two days mister missus don't hit help let go please

daddy I'll be good let me go it hurts ouch I won't let go please I can't walk on my own, what will you let me go finally, damn it, are you deaf or what, let me go Vittorio, you son of a bitch, am I made of iron, will you fucking let go or you'll really tear my shoulder out of its socket!

"Stay here. Don't come out. Or even better: hide behind the advertisement there, you'll get out of the picture."

"Where did you put my bag?"

"What?"

"You don't have a bag. You lost it. You can say goodbye to it, they've trampled everything to a pulp."

"Who?"

"Come on, come on."

Below, in the street, the Crowd was rolling. Nicholas was still very confused and when he looked out over the railing, the view opened up not yet fully sealed association channels. He shuddered, cowered. Run! The psychomeme tongues of the thick secretion of the Crowd were gently touching him, like flames of a high fire. They're chasing! They're hurting! It hurts! It's safer there! Run!

She tugged him again. He didn't resist; he couldn't quite make up his mind to make any move, the impulses were coming from outside again. He walked almost without will. Mrs. Qurant led Hunt to the public elevators from the fifth-floor overpass, from which the Shadow had dragged him. They rode two-thirds of the way up the canyon and emerged onto the terrace of a disused cafe. Here, projectors were installed displaying a large advertisement for one of the drug corporations. They sat down against the wall.

The terrace was small, about four by seven yards in the corner, under a rolled-up safety net, there were folding chairs, under their seats was a small pile of garbage that had been blown in. The only way to get here was by a simple footbridge from the elevators/stairs, the holo-advertisement closed the space on two sides, the glare was blinding. Just beyond the terrace, where another trestle ran diagonally three or four yards higher up, a huge spidery shadow swelled from its supports and the hooks of the monofilament on which it was suspended.

The crowd was flowing down the canyon floor, an angry volcanic outpouring, only heads and shoulders were visible, the beast had no end, it stretched and stretched, screams burst into the dark sky. Runners were screaming, cars were screaming, order machines were screaming, and even New Yorkers looking out of their windows. Added to this was the roar of UCAVs, news network helicopters and manned helicopters of the army, police and FBI. There were also a few judiciary machines spinning here, probably some of them swallowed by the flood had managed to send an emergency signal earlier. Someone tried to speak to the runners from these helicopters, but the words fired through the loudspeakers were almost completely lost in the noise.

Hunt smiled mockingly under his breath at the speaker's efforts. Wow, crowd psychology...! Le Bon's fishing exercises.

Nevertheless, the sight was blood-curdling.

"Mother of God..."

"She shuddered."

"What?"

"What do you mean: what?"

"What language was that?"

"What?"

"I don't know. What you said."

"What I said?"

"That's what I'm asking."

"What are you talking about?"

They looked down on this invasion of ants. Every now and then the sharp cries of the dying, those being trampled, pierced through. A real marathon, Hunt estimated the number of those carried away by the Crowd at several thousand. It was rolling through the street canyon like boiled mud, with a slight squint it was easy to believe that in fact it was a wild element rushing there —or even better: some organic sheepskin rippling over the road and sidewalks.

Night, but with the street lights, all the advertisements, the blimps, the blinding searchlights of the police vehicles... it was brighter there than at noon on the Liano Estacado.

Hunt shook and looked at himself. He found numerous footprints on his coat, but his body itself was clearly undamaged. He could still pick up numerous signals of physical suffering, but he had no idea which ones were coming from his own body.

He looked at Colleen. She didn't look battered. How had she gotten through it anyway? What had happened to her during the Mob attack? She had no Fungus. Had Vittorio saved her as well? He had certainly taken care of Marina first. Where are Marina and Qurant?

"Don't you know where your husband is?"

"They managed to escape. I saw them."

"Where?"

"I think they ran up the overpass there." She raised her hand to her lips, said something, and tilted her head reflexively. "Yes, they're still there."

He has a phone. Well, yes, why shouldn't he?

In any case —worth remembering.

He now looked at the enclavist more closely. They were sitting on the end hulls in the row of projectors, more than three meters apart, which was a relatively safe distance, and at the same time allowed them to communicate without raising their voices too much. Both Qurants were sculpted, but Colleen was more subtle, her designer must have been a lover of Modigliani, there was something about her complexion and the line of her chin, in the curve of her neck. Age? She wasn't aging yet, that much could be told from her appearance alone.

He contemplated her face like a work of art —which it was —while she looked out onto the terrace. The fire of the giant hologram would burn the last threads of shadow from the enclavist's possible wrinkles anyway. Colleen Qurant's face was smooth, calm, perhaps only in the break in the line of her eyebrows did a certain irritation show.

"You're holding up well."

"I pray. It helps." Her associations were not compatible with his.

But he went with the flow.

"Yes, I know, mantras and circular procedures, they must have advised on TV. No? There was also in that CDC announcement..."

"What are you on about? I said: this is not a cult."

"Huh? Who did I say that..."

"You didn't have to say it," she interrupted him. "She explained to me what it is. I don't have this nano in my head. So I will always be more exposed, get used to it. You don't have to say it, I can hear it anyway."

He fell silent. He looked back at the Devil.

"Where were you, you bastard?" he growled in OVR.

"What?" the manager was irritated. "You cut me off from the traffic editors yourself. You forbid me to help, so don't blame me later. I did what I could, Fungus was heating up to the max."

"Hey, a little more politely!"

"As you prefer, sir."

"*Apage*," Nicholas grated.

The application closed.

The crowd slowly began to thin out. UCAVs were firing canisters of some kind of gas. From a side street, someone drove a semi into the crowd, blood spurted from under the metal, Colleen grabbed her knee with a hiss.

"What's it like there?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"In your enclave."

She shrugged, not stopping massaging her leg.

"Normal. How is it supposed to be?"

"Well, it's not a normal enclave. I'll have to live there for a while. I hope so. Because we probably won't get there at all."

"Where do you think I was born and raised? Amish? I lived like that too."

"How?"

"Like you."

"Us?" Nicholas laughed. He was immensely amused by this pronoun in the mouth of an enclavist.

"You, you, you" Colleen nodded seriously. "I was even sure I was happy. I took advantage of everything I could take advantage of. Whatever doesn't harm another person... and so on. Drugs? Why not? Since they don't even harm me. A few hours a week at the computer to provide myself with relative social luxury. Apart from that —what? Enormous amounts of free time. You have to fill it somehow. I didn't stand out from my generation in anything. I took pleasure. I don't say this ironically. It was pleasure. As long as something happened. Do you understand me?"

"I'm not sure... I mean —yes, I do."

"Do you understand? I did what I wanted, and I wanted what gave pleasure, and pleasure always gave only something new. That's also why drug fads disappear so quickly. That advert that I sit under... They don't advertise a product, but a company, because a drug's life lasts a week, two at most. That's how long all my loves, friendships, fascinations lasted. After three nights, I was bored with each one. I didn't want to remember their names."

"Listen, you don't have to confess to me here, I don't at all..."

"Don't be afraid."

"Really, let's just leave it alone, I'm sorry."

"Don't be afraid. I'm not afraid. Can you listen to me?" He laughed nervously.

"Are you converting me?"

"No. I'm telling you how I ended up in Four-Leaf.

"Where?"

"Our enclave. Four-Leaf. It's because of its shape on a map. I was like you: anyone who tried to drag me to a cultural enclave, I would shoot on the spot. I didn't understand them and I didn't want to have anything to do with them. I said what you said: weaklings voluntarily flee into the arms of tyrants. But I was tired, so terribly tired... I fell asleep tired and woke up tired. I saw it in the eyes of my friends too. Once I woke up like that in someone's living room on the carpet between two pheno-twins. They were passing Kevorkians above me. They saw that I was awake, and one of them offered me a pill. I took it. Reflexively. They took it like another drug, yawning as well. I don't know if they had any specific motive, I doubt it. I thought the same way: why not? Why not? Why not? Indeed, there was no reason to refuse. No pain. Relax. The carpet was soft. I would have to think really hard. They swallowed theirs."

"And you?" Hunt whispered.

"Well, I wouldn't be here!" she laughed, until he felt that he had to laugh too, once again.

"What stopped you?"

"One of them defecated posthumously. I went to the bathroom to wash up. In the meantime, their medic's people arrived, and I lost my pill somewhere."

"A coincidence."

"Possibly. That's what it looked like. In any case, I flew to the forests of Canada for the weekend."

"And?"

"And boom! I saw the world. I don't know, some hormone deficiency or what, never mind. I experienced an epiphany, like an epiphany. I can't talk about it coherently, because I don't understand it, and I don't know which modes of association to use to draw the appropriate words. The simplest things: I spent the whole morning looking at the bark of the nearest tree. I sat and looked and felt like I could sit there forever, there was so much to see, to absorb. It completely broke me. I couldn't get out of that forest. I called an analyst. He

told me to call a medic. I didn't want to. A mighty river was rushing through my senses. It drove me into the ground."

"First close encounter with nature, huh?"

"No. It could have been anything. The backpack fascinated me just as much. My body. Do you realize what an incredible fractal your own hand is? Take a look sometime. The texture of your skin will possess you. Your fingernails—look at your fingernails. Something incredible. That smoothness and hardness. Touch them with your fingertip. What? Or your knuckles. When you clench your fist and the skin stretches."

"You still experience it."

"I remember it," she emphasized. "Don't you have one such fragment of time, a memory, a bundle of experiences from a specific moment, don't you? That it keeps haunting you in the same, indelible shape, sometimes more real than the present?"

He did, of course. He could still hear Marina's wheezing.

"Someone who was an expert in such matters," he said quickly "once told me that these memories cannot remain unchanged. That with each subsequent replay, we add something, subtract something, change something; that we always remember in context and this settles, the memory is not complete, it needs complements, but memory does not distinguish between what is complement and what is original, as a result we remember memories of memories of memories..."

"But this memory is complete, finished," she protested hotly. "At least mine is."

"Can you compare?"

"That's how I remember it, and that's how it was!" she pouted.

He shrugged.

"Then I went back to my place," she continued "to work, to the city, and I got sick, and that was the end. Physically I couldn't take it anymore. I felt the shit pouring into me with all my senses. I was struck by the hideousness

of every single aspect of the next day of my life. Laugh, laugh. I know how it sounds, but those are the first words. I fell into such a nervous breakdown that two months of chemical adjustments didn't help me."

"The enclave helped you."

"No. Julius helped me. In the enclave, I'm safe from most of this shit."

Nicholas shook his head in disbelief that was not entirely fake. It allowed him to escape Colleen's gaze, who looked him straight in the eye with vulgar insolence—even though he was beyond any doubt aware of that look; but the enclavist disregarded all NEti conventions.

Into the narrow street canyon, between the parallel walls of the buildings, more and more helicopters, also CAVs and UCAVs, even a dozen or so locusts, were falling: the ultra-black coatings of WarFlies hurt the eyes with two-dimensional, angular spots of light-hungry bioceramics. Above the street and above the chaotic tangle of overpasses, diagonal sidewalks, shopping platforms and air parks, above the taut network of mono-veins invisible to the naked eye holding it all in the air—this complicated ballet of mechanical insects was taking place: small (like locusts UCAVs the size of a desk) and large (like municipal maintenance CAVs, almost too thick to squeeze into the canyon). The eye could not keep up, the corrective pilot programs threw the machines in all directions, fast, faster and faster, it was a miracle that they did not collide with each other. In the end, two civilian copters did indeed collide and, thrown in a spiral by the resulting momentum, collapsed to the ground somewhere around the corner, cutting a dozen or so fullerene strings along the way. Hunt ostentatiously watched them go.

"It still amazes me..." he muttered, continuing an old thought. "How beautifully a person can rationalize his weaknesses..."

He expected anger, resentment—she smiled.

"Right? Just look around."

"You mean this?" He pointed to the drug corporation's ad. "There's nothing you can do. This is the fourth largest business in America, after info-electronics, entertainment and security, even before education and healthcare. These gigabucks had to come out somewhere, and it's better that they came out here than

somewhere else. This whole new financial center of New York wouldn't have been built if not for the investments of drug corporations. Oh, there, there, and those two, and that nasty one, those are all buildings built by them. I used to service them when I worked in Washington, and I know what it looks like. Since chemistry has descended to such levels of molecular sculpture that there is no barrier of realization between the model of a molecule and a molecule—all legal prohibitions have lost their meaning. You can't ban something that is completely harmless to the body, and on top of that—something that cannot be defined. Phidias, for example—what harm does it do to anyone if a person turns into a living sculpture for a few hours and slows down their perception? They release even stranger things. Doubles. Mumuls. Kushkudans. Puke. Fury. Or whatever the hit of the day is. These are simple laws of economics, you can't change mathematics. If it weren't for drug taxation, the budget would have collapsed about three years ago. In Europe, VAT on drugs is thirty-three percent. People think..."

"You have a guilty conscience!" she exclaimed, as if she had suddenly guessed a clue from a crossword puzzle.

He fell silent in mid-sentence.

"Damn you, Mrs. Qurant," he mumbled after a moment. "I have no remorse. You're the one who puts everything in moral categories."

"Not true. If you want, I can put it in economic categories. Oh, please. Exegesis of the Crisis, copyright by Colleen Qurant. It had to end up like this."

"He he he. Give me a hug, Nostradamus."

"I know, *post factum* everyone is wise, but I've said it before, Julius is a witness. From the moment capitalism lost its competition and was left alone on the battlefield, that is, from the nineties of the last century—it also stopped, feeling the pressure of evolution. We have gone too far blindly in one direction and we may not have a chance to turn back. We were doing too well, we were too self-indulgent, too comfortable, too dependent on the present. The lack of competition for capitalism was bound to lead to something like this in the long run: to degeneration into decadent, mindlessly exaggerated forms, into absurd rectilinear expansions. Bigger fangs, more mass, more powerful muscles, the Economic Wars. Yes, because that is what Wars are: a capitalist dead end.

"Because I know..." he shrugged. "You see, the whole point is that there was no choice then, and there still is not. Each subsequent step was necessary, inevitable, the only right one. If you didn't take it in time, you lost to those who were faster. So straight to the Wars. More than inbreeding and loose mutations, it looks to me like tight convergence. Although info-economists defend themselves against this term."

She made a loose gesture with her hand.

"Anyway, now they fall on us like a bolt from the blue: the Plague, the Depression, the madness of programs —and we see them rising from the battlefield: the Hong Kong Company, Israel, Transvaal Industries, Molipol, who is that anyway, I've never heard of Molipol, for example. What are their structures, what hierarchies, what priorities, what methods? What will these new rules of the game be? What will we have to borrow from them to survive? We have no idea what will emerge from this, if another form of capitalism, then at least it will be so exotic that it could just as well be called a completely new word. After all, the game itself will never end. They will try everything, and whatever gives the best results will be taken over by the others. They will buy out the latecomers. So will speciation in even smaller details: what is more efficient, what maximizes profits, what drives indicators upwards... Take over the genes of the winning economy, and everything is the economy. Exactly the same process that led to the wars. But in a completely new environment."

She drew him into her argument. When she was persuading with heartfelt conviction, she was completely different: almost joyful, very girlish in her gestures and glances. He could hardly restrain his smile and even more dangerous reflexes. Yes, this is how one can infect a person with enthusiasm. Even if not with enthusiasm —some feeling will always be induced, the geyser beats too close, thought leads.

"God and truth," he said, however, to keep in form "I have heard such croaking on the occasion of all the major offensives in the IEW. You probably didn't come up with your analogies either, it's some kind of lasting memotrend, it's been flowing like this since the beginning of the century, I..."

Colleen's head exploded right in his face. He got hit in the eyes with blood and brain mass. Something hard fell into his half-open mouth.

He choked. He couldn't see anything. He jumped to his feet, but tripped

over the projector and fell over. The pain of a bruised shin. Mental and physiological shock, uncoordinated, trembling movements. He had no control over his instincts; he was more composed then, in front of the clinic, when he got the series. He must have been screaming. Something was cracking all around, as if someone was breaking bundles of dry sticks. A white run was born in his right hand, exploding along the nerves. Tears came to Hunt's blood-drenched eyes.

Thudding! The entire terrace shook.

"Devil!"

"Sir...?"

"Devil!" he sobbed. He felt and heard almost nothing, except the scream of his right hand. "Pull me out!"

"Are you giving me back full control over the editors?"

"Yes. Save me, damn it!"

"Unconditionally, sir?"

"Yes!!"

He pulled him to his feet, forced air into his lungs, opened his eyes wide. The manager did not suppress sensations, and Hunt felt the warm moisture of that red that blurred the world on his eyelids, on his eyeballs.

Light and darkness, light and darkness —these were the only changes that were noticeable. He had clearly run through this advertisement holo. Then he ran down some stairs; he ran down for a long time. He jumped down from somewhere. The gust turned him around and Nicholas caught his shoulder against something soft. In the tearful world, one Devil had sharp and distinct contours. He waved at Hunt urgently, as if Nicholas had the power to accelerate his legs even more.

His heart was accelerating his blood to supersonic speeds, his lungs were tearing apart, he spat saliva with each breath. He was running on a flat surface now, the wind was blowing at his back. He saw a great movement behind the splashes of watery colors, darker and darker. Down again. Stairs. A sprint on a flat. Are they shooting? God, the whole nightmare from the clinic is repeating

itself! His right hand was still burning. The Devil/Baryshnikov was forcing him to keep up this murderous pace. Hot blood was pulsing under his skull. I'm about to lose consciousness.

He bent his sixth finger. He tripped and fell.

Lucifer wrung his hands.

"Sir! You have to run! Sir...!"

Hunt got up on all fours, wiped his face. He looked: his hand was red. But it was his blood, now he could see where the fire had come from: three fingers were missing. They had shot them off. Christ God. You could see the bones. Those little stumps... I can move them. But the blood —it's still flowing. Stop it!

He stood up, staggered to the wall. The Devil was energetically pointing out an escape route. Nicholas looked around. Some dark alley under the air boulevard. Heaps of garbage.

He dragged himself back to the intersection and looked out onto the street. Behind him the Devil was shouting requests and incantations.

"The scattered rearguard of the Crowd was avoiding the burning wreck of a large helicopter. Another, similar machine was hanging: a military dropship. A dozen or so smaller helicopters circled even higher, the remains of the swarm that had been tracking the Crowd's passage."

So this time they sent manned ones. Well, yes —after what the Shadow had done to the police UCAVs, they had relied on humans. But they hadn't anticipated December. The unlucky pilots must have gotten caught in the convective psychomeme current. It was probably the shattered one that was shooting at me, falling already —otherwise it would have had time to take me down, it wouldn't have missed so terribly: the hand, Colleen, the concrete. (Surprising analytical calmness of cold thoughts.) I wonder what's going on inside that surviving CAV. Why are they hanging so still. Are they waiting?

"Clear my scan from the last few minutes," he said in OVR. "Block that hand, for fuck's sake!"

The pain diminished, then disappeared. Lucifer showed him how to apply a

tourniquet from the belt of his coat. Hunt tied it with his teeth.

The artificially sharpened AV recording of Nicholas's mad sprint revealed little of the action. Only the final frames, the jagged POV shots as he ran across the street (now he could see that he was on the other side: the drug company ad burning high on the wall of the building opposite) —that was all he learned.

In slow motion: Vittorio, shot heavily in the back and legs, disappears behind a newsstand, along with the mangled corpse of Marina Vassone.

It was a second-story promenade, Hunt guessed. They must have escaped from that overhang when the military helicopters came. That's why the other one hasn't flown away: he's waiting for the Crowd to dissipate so he can safely land the soldiers. Vittorio can't look out from behind that kiosk, the machine guns are keeping him in check. They've undoubtedly called in reinforcements too.

"Good news," the Devil said. "You're not at the top of their priority list, otherwise they would have abandoned Dr. Vassone and gone after you. She's higher up."

Hunt looked back at the Devil in silence. His left hand unconsciously reached for his wounded hand. A shiver ran through his body. He licked his lips. Where's my cane?

"Open Ranger," he growled at the Devil, instantly furious with rage. "Revoke the right of control. Baryshnikov only on physiological support and motor skills. No more self-will. See that cannon? Next to the corpse with the burnt leg?"

"I see it."

"For her."

"Sir..."

But Hunt was already running. He was over thirty meters from the burning helicopter. The soldier, whose leg had been burned (but that wasn't why he was dead: his chin was touching his left shoulder blade), had fallen ten feet away. He was still clutching his rifle.

The moment Nicholas put his hands on him —correction: his left hand —the

Nobel Ranger entered his body. It was much more complicated with one hand used only to awkwardly support the weapon, but Hunt managed it in two seconds, as if he had practiced every single movement for months. Raise, activate, cock, fold, aim. Fortunately, the rifle was not coupled to the implant of a deceased user and had no lock.

Nicholas's entire initiative was limited to choosing the target and the moment of firing. Hunt had barely taken up the position. He had not yet calmed his breathing: one of the editor's tasks was to eliminate the effects of such inconveniences.

Ranger painted the helicopter's most vulnerable areas on its body. Shwokk! shwokk! shwokkkk! The rifle barked next to Nicholas' cheek. The machine under fire shuddered, swung to the side, lowered its nose and began to turn toward Nicholas, its guns rotating even faster. The rifle shook and trembled like a living animal trying to escape the grip of its tormentor.

Shwokkkkkkkkkkk!

"Sir! You have to escape! Now!"

He kept on firing. Ranger directed the weapon, Hunt looked somewhere completely different: up, at the kiosk on the promenade to the left. Finally (after a very long second, two) the dark silhouette of Vittorio emerged from behind him, with the limp body of a woman in a black coat, her face turned into dirty pulp, a white shin peeking out from the leg of her pants. The shadow only flashed before Hunt's eyes —if he hadn't been looking out for it, he wouldn't have noticed it at all. Despite the weight, Vittorio ran even faster than the A&S jurdas in the Watergate corridor. Kiosk —promenade —elevator shaft —overpass stairs —and he was gone, dissolved in the colorful night.

Shwokkkpch! Empty magazine.

He threw away the heavy rifle.

"This way!"

But the helicopter seemed to lose interest in Hunt: it suddenly jumped up, tumbled over the side and fell between the overpasses, following Vittorio.

In Hunt's perception, that's exactly what it looked like: the shooting and

the helicopter's rotation lasting ten times longer than its departure.

"Here!"

Nicholas listened to the Devil and jumped behind the wreck, because one of the guns of the rising and receding machine finally caught him in its sights and immediately unleashed a burst that shook the burning helicopter and split the road in two. He may not have been at the top of their list, but that didn't mean they would waste the opportunity.

"She's dead!" Lucifer, wrapped in fire, convinced Hunt. "You have to run! They'll soon..."

"Exactly" Nicholas muttered, cautiously peering out from behind the wreck. "If they were sure she was dead, they would have taken care of me instead of hunting an innocent Shadow. Something's wrong with your logic, my Devil."

"But you saw it with your own eyes!"

"So what?"

The CAV disappeared around the bend and Hunt ran out from behind the flames.

After a dozen or so steps, he fell to his knees, licked the dirty concrete, and urinated. Baryshnikov's support was enough to lift him up and pull him out from under the monad (or whatever that was), but Lucifer fell into true hysteria.

"Fungus can't handle it! What are you doing! Sir," His eyes were burning red, hot, sulfurous steam was pouring from his nostrils. "You have to turn around! Hide! They're recording everything! Sir we're under the net!"

Nicholas ran into the elevator. He felt someone cutting his knee ligaments. When he got to the pedestrian level, he fell into a childish depression, he almost sobbed out loud. He dragged himself to the kiosk with his thumb in his mouth.

A crowd passed through here, that was obvious at first glance. A dozen corpses, including three right under the kiosk. Teeth marks on the counter. Feces against the wall. Blood. The stench of a huge human mass, in the air and in his mind.

The three under the kiosk were two women and a child. He approached the one leaning half-sitting against the ATM. Black hair, so pale —but the Necropolis MUI probably added its two cents here. The turtleneck was torn along the diagonal stitch of the bullets, from the sternum to the groin. Black streaks on the face. He wiped them away with his left hand. Skin very hot, very soft.

Marina opened her eyes.

"Where...?"

"He's pulling them away. I have to get you out of here. How are your legs?"

She seemed to have lost consciousness again, because her pupils rolled back under her eyelids, she banged her head against the case of the ATM cashchip reader; she didn't answer.

"Devil, diagnosis!" Hunt shouted in OVR.

The manager immediately launched a medical expert programs, Lucifer ostentatiously leaned over Vassone.

"About one hundred and eight Fahrenheit. Major blood loss. Probably extensive internal injuries, nanomatically repaired to some unknown extent. It had to be an invasive treatment, the Shadow probably put everything in one dose, she now has a massive dose of dense nano inside her. One of two options: she'll recover completely or she'll die, and fast. Pulse."

Hunt took her wrist in his left hand. The Devil/medanalyzer measured.

"Two hundred and eighty. The horror, sir. Pupils."

Hunt opened his eyelids.

"Mild concussion. Please smell the breath."

Hunt sniffed.

"That's enough."

"Prognosis?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," the Devil/medanalyzer pouted "but all the compara-

tive material I have on nanomatic treatments is a record of your own body's reaction to the regenerative stimulants Vittorio gave you to help heal those four gunshot wounds faster. None of which were mortal, however. Here the situation is completely different: Mrs. Vassone was probably in a state of clinical death when Shadow transfused her with his nano-cells. I would say that something like hemolytic shock should be expected."

"Can I move her?"

"Do you have an option?"

"You better not be so sly."

"Excuse me, sir. First of all, you should get out from under the net."

Where is Julius? Hunt thought. Did he escape? Or is he lying here somewhere, dead, unrecognizable in a soulless form?

Throwing Vassone's light bag over his shoulder, he embraced Marina under the arms and knees, lifting her up. Jesus, I can't lift her.

"Baryshnikov, motor skills" he gasped.

The editor balanced his body.

Just don't get into some organic mental turmoil now...

"This way" Lucifer pointed.

Marina, a dead weight, hot to the touch like a sunny boulder, flew through Nicholas's hands, especially since his right hand was of little use to him. The woman's head, limply tilted back, rocked from side to side.

"Block!" he hissed through gritted teeth, because his muscles protested louder and louder: Nicholas was a physically weak man, or at least in no better condition than average, he had always been more concerned with appearance and impression than actual strength. I won't get there, he repeated in his mind now, I won't get there, I won't get there, I won't get there.

Step by step, to the rhythm of a black mantra.

Yet he didn't even know where he was supposed to go. The Devil led them

down to the street, and into a building, and into a yard, and into a basement, and into cellars, and to yet another street... Bergmann's Death accompanied them persistently, wiping the sweat from Marina's face with long, white fingers, the scythe shaft tapping against the dirty concrete. They passed game animals biting off their fingers, inhabited and uninhabited jungles of thought. The Devil urged. Hunt couldn't feel his body at all anymore. Bright blood was gushing from the wounds on his fingers from the great effort. He stumbled despite Baryshnikov. But he had to keep going. (I won't get there, I won't get there, I won't get there). "Take it," he whispered when he felt he was about to lose consciousness. The Devil took it.

Underground

” WHERE are we?”
”In the subway, sir.”

He heard his own question (what a strange voice) and immediately a spark of association jumped to Marina, his first —only —question, about Marina herself.

”Her?”

”Alive. At least she’s breathing.”

”I can’t see anything.”

”It’s dark here, sir.”

Hunt sat up. His head was spinning. How much blood had I lost? He reached for his maimed hand. A piece of fluff, he could barely feel anything, the manager had given it a hard block. However, he noted the dampness on the fingers of his left hand. He checked the tourniquet, tightened it. One of two options: either I’ll bleed out or I’ll get gangrene. To a hospital! Call the medic! Of course he couldn’t.

”Increase the contrast a little.”

A small cube in the concrete. On one side open to great darkness, from above —to a narrow shaft of partial shade. An old recess of a technical manhole? Most likely. In that case, there, in this darkness, there should be a subway tunnel. Inactive, of course (public transport: a hundred people crammed into a carriage

—the simplest recipe for a Crowd).

Marina lay next to him, as Nicholas' weakened body, escaping from the grip of the implant, had left her. He could only see the outline of her figure. He searched for an exposed fragment of her skin with his healthy hand. Still feverish. Such a high temperature lasting for so long —the brain may not withstand it. But who can predict what the nano will do?

Time —what's the time?

"Clock: eleven sixteen. It's already day up there."

He stood up and felt sick. Physiology has its own laws, though. Leaning against the wall, he tottered to the tunnel exit and emptied his bladder into the darkness of the subway. Somewhere deep inside, to the left, a single dim light loomed. Besides, it looked as if New York's electrical grid had broken down in the meantime. Well, it was very possible: there is no system that a human factor could not dismantle.

He returned to the Marina. He felt for the bag, opened it.

"Touch," Hunt muttered.

He ran his left hand over the tangled luggage. "Cosmetic bag," the Devil said, "LEDpad, I don't know, book, gun, I don't know, a piece of clothing, I don't know, I don't know..." Nicholas took out and unrolled the LEDpad to its maximum. He stiffened the screen and selected the brightest screensaver. Shadows exploded in the manhole, and it became almost light in those two square meters in front of Hunt. He placed the LEDpad against the wall and poured the contents of the bag onto the concrete. He immediately noticed Vittorio's Corpse-Thief and the dead assassin's blade. He put the blade in the left pocket of his coat. He pulled it out again to check the magazine: full.

There was a leather case for electronic juridical jewelry, Hunt found the phone. It was deactivated, though it worked (Nicholas quickly checked), but it was completely useless to Hunt: one call and he would be traced.

In a handy black collector's bag, emblazoned with the silver initials MSV, were several photos of Jason Vassone (mostly as a four- or five-year-old), an impressive collection of business cards —even to Nicholas —two self-adhesive spreadsheets, dictating gum, and a Seiko sensory notebook. He tried to get

into it, but the notebook seemed to recognize its owner's fingerprints. He had missed the touch of Marina's finger. He glanced at her, all black and white in the lantern light of the LED screen, deadly monochrome, and had given up. He put the rest of his luggage back in the bag and struggled to slide it under Marina's head. An unconscious person always feels strangely heavy. Hunt put his ear to Marina's chest. Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump. It was pounding like crazy. She was alive, or at least breathing, as the Devil had said. Although when Nicholas straightened up, he couldn't see that breath. He watched for a long time. After his half-brother's tragic accident (he was seven years old then), Nicholas began to be haunted by fear of the death of those closest to him (though not yet himself). He was given the chance to see his dead brother —and accepted the existence of such creatures as "dead people" with the power of his childhood imagination. Fear haunted him especially at night, because sleep was most similar to death: stillness, soundlessness. Maybe they really were dead, had died so quietly, discreetly? He would sneak into Imelda's and his mother's bedroom at night, stand by their beds, look, listen. The rhythm of their breathing that he noticed finally calmed him down. Until one of his mother's partners woke up, saw him standing in the semidarkness in tense silence —and had a small heart attack. Nicholas ended up in a closed school near Atlanta.

"What do you think, Lucifer, did Mr. Qurant manage to avoid him?"

"Yes. Most likely. They had no reason to kill him. As far as I know."

"Or his wife."

"I haven't seen Mr. Qurant's corpse anywhere, sir."

"That's good. Do you know the location of Four-Leaf?"

"Yes."

Hunt placed the LEDpad on his lap, then partially rolled up the screen.

"Damn it," he cursed through his teeth when he read that the LEDpad did not recognize the implant. The communication module was still blocked. He would have to do it mechanically, with clumsy fingers, and in 2D. He checked the lower pocket of the pad. Fortunately, there was a 3D-move glove there. Unfortunately, it was for the right hand.

The LEDpad found the nearest node automatically. Nicholas assumed that Marina would not be stupid enough to use a computer somehow connected to her. It was most likely more loot from Shadow the looter. Fortunately, he had a paid subscription in advance. Hunt scrolled through the address book that was not password-protected. CNN. Of course, he was a subscriber, but he did not intend to identify himself to them. He entered the public resources. The dialogue search engine surprised him. It would be easier through audio input, but that would upload Hunt's voice pattern to their server (if the configuration he couldn't get to didn't cut the transmission to flat content), so he laboriously tapped with the index finger of his left hand. The dialoguist patiently narrowed the selection. It ended up with seven A-V files. That was not many, considering how many network machines there were then, they must have turned the lenses on their satellites too. So compilations, no doubt. To get the raw data out, you'd need a sneaker; and real raw data these days is a pipe dream.

He turned the volume down. The crowd was rolling through the street canyons with the barely audible growl of a thousand throats. Fast Forward. There they were: two military CAVs. He stopped and enlarged the signage. Which turned out: not Guard, but Air Force Special Tactics. It didn't mean anything, though —the bureaucrat takes advantage of whatever offers the least resistance in the hierarchy.

He was looking for Qurant. He had glimpsed him once at the beginning of the shooting, running arm in arm with Marina. Then the overhang had left the frame and was no longer in any of the files.

But there was Vittorio. The camera caught him a block away, still with the mangled body of the anonymous woman in his arms. He carried it, wrapped in Marina's black coat, running at a low sprint across the road, even the animals were moving out of his way. The helicopter came out from behind the overpass, opened fire on the spot. Vittorio was thrown into the air, thrown against the arched support of the upper range. He still didn't drop the body. He turned so as to shield it from the bullets: it was they, the corpse —not the corpse, that were the real target.

Hunt stared at the LEDscreen, the bluish glow discoloring his motionless face.

The CAV had descended to four meters and was now firing almost horizontally, the few ricochets scraping the sidewalks and building facades, severing

individual tentacles of the Crowd. No finesse, just firepower (battlefield logic). Vittorio crawled along with the corpse behind the support, having previously torn off his left leg. The helicopter swerved to the side and continued firing. It was tearing the Shadow to shreds. Vittorio reached somewhere to his belt, grabbed something (he still had a few fingers). Wham! A ball of white fire engulfed them for one or two frames, Vittorio and the woman. The CAV jumped back, stopped firing. The cameras focused on the remains of both bodies, burned to the bone, they rested in the very center of a dark yellow circle burned out in the sidewalk. The helicopter hovered over him until the Crowd had completely disappeared; then a Guards vehicle appeared and the CAV flew away. End of file.

The commentary described the spectacular incident as a "brutal but effective thwarting of a terrorist attack."

Hunt involuntarily glanced at Marina. She was feverishly motionless, pumped up by bionano that was foreign to her immunology. He tried to reconstruct Vittorio's train of thought, but every now and then he was distracted by the fresh memory of Shadow's massacre. How long had it all taken? About six seconds from the moment the Special Tactics helicopter appeared in the perspective of the street to its fiery self-destruction. Did Vittorio hesitate for even a millisecond? No. Maybe he pre-edited himself. If so, what was he thinking when he composed such a macro? What was he counting on?

Me.

"Devil."

"Sir?"

"Suggestions."

"Open a one-day unlimited freebie and send a message to Mr. Qurant's phone. If it's up to date, we go to the enclave. If not, we surrender ourselves to the juridictor."

"The D.A. will fight back, they'll take me. As soon as I'm in custody, I'm dead."

"You have a strong bargaining chip. Dr. Vassone. You can negotiate through the Jesuits."

"Vassone is dead."

"Not anymore. You think they didn't check the scans? Much more thoroughly."

"You assume there's anyone to negotiate with at all. I doubt it. Information circulates in the system, but it has no owner."

"You can negotiate execution. The Air Force Special Tactics reports to someone."

Hunt shook his head.

"You don't know, Devil. It doesn't work that way."

"Then through the media. Sign an exclusive contract with one of the networks."

"What can I say?"

"The truth."

"Well, I didn't expect that from you."

"The truth, sir."

"Mind you, I've committed no crime under the public code so far. After such an appearance, I'm guaranteed fifteen years in the fed just for breaking those rules of confidentiality that I signed myself; and if they count it as treason, life."

"Life in a federal prison is still better than death, sir. You should see a doctor as soon as possible."

"Yeah, their doctors would have seen to me by now."

"I don't understand you. That's paranoia. With all due respect, sir. You have to be realistic. No one has the authority to order the government to murder an unarmed man on the spot. Regardless of the accusations."

"There are ways."

"Oh?"

"There are."

He knew, because in Real Life he had almost witnessed the creation of such deadly memoirs twice, and had participated in those trials himself. The first time, the instigator was a sworn enemy of the victim's protector. The victim had survived only because she had escaped to Africa in time. The second case was more terrifying: there was no instigator. As far as Hunt could tell, the whole thing had started as a joke over a beer. About two months later, the unfortunate man was shot dead by a panicked congressional parking lot guard. The guard was never even charged; the deceased bore a striking resemblance to two unidentified terrorists at the top of the FBI's hit list.

The Enclave was actually a very good solution.

He went to the Vermus Adv. website and began a half-hour profiling session, viewing compilations of advertising materials and answering sophisticated questions in time. Blood dripped from his right hand onto the Senspad. He pulled a white elastic glove from the pad's pocket and pulled it over his stump as a makeshift bandage. He now looked like a comic-book cripple-villain. The cold glow of the LEDscreen blinded him. When, after sending Qurant an allusive query (he had found Julius in the state census), he stretched and looked back at Marina, he saw only a cloud of black moths.

Marina, Marina... about ten hours until dusk, if you don't recover by then, I'll have to leave you, I wouldn't carry you far.

Sorry, Vittorio, I'm no Shadow.

When his pupils cleared (he didn't ask the Devil for help), he saw that in the meantime she had turned onto her side. Now he could smell her suffering, perhaps somewhat muffled by Necropolis, which was a realm of death where no one suffers or rejoices. Hunt put down the LEDpad (having unrolled its screen again), leaned over Marina. In a reflexive reaction of her muscles to the high temperature, she curled into a prayerful-fetal form. He turned her head toward the light. She had brick-red petechiae on her forehead and neck. When he moved his left hand over her lips, Vassone's quick, short breath almost burned him, it really hurt. A normal person would have been dead—but she, the unrighteous spawn of the Shadow, was suffering. He could also smell the warm urine. Pressing on her eyelids, he checked the sleep phase: REM nightmares. She curled her fingers into half-clenched fists, like an infant.

After consulting the Devil (he was against it), he stepped out into the cold darkness of the subway tunnel, the LEDpad wrapped around his right forearm, its thin screen bent into a fan-shaped collar —a substitute for a flashlight. It was the kind of light that created the most shadows. He walked along the wall, away from the tracks, Lucifer leading the way.

There was no one on the closed platform, except for the corpse of an animal—he knew it was an animal because all her fingers and toes had been bitten off, she was naked—and a hot monad. The monad confused him, he had barely passed the third pillar. "Why not?" He thought. Why not? It looked awful. Weak, fragmented peripheries of the body, obscenely protruding from it. They will lose me, betray me, I will fall apart. He stepped on his left hand, but the growths would not leave. What a hideous thing! He hit the pillar. A furious Devil emerged from the cloud of pain. "I will tear your heart out!" Horrified, Nicholas threw himself backwards—and emerged from under the monad. "The toilets are over there, sir," the Devil pointed.

Returning, he thought about this obvious weakness of the Fungus. Apparently, it was only blocking free psychomemes, unable to resist concentrated thought constructs. Direct pressure—it was too much for him. The subliminal mantras of Fungus do not create any impenetrable barrier "around" the mind, as it is easiest to imagine in the fashion of computer visualizations. They simply hinder osmosis to some extent.

He asked the manager for a diagram of the neuroconnections of Toulouse 10—By default, an application acting as Help and promotional material for the company was launched—an internal Bedeker, configured in the Bridge. The Devil smoothly took on the role.

"Here is the brain, please, you see, neurons, axons, dendrites, white matter, gray matter, synapses, here is a cross-section through the dendrite tree, here you can see nanomatic growths, you can recognize unidirectional and bidirectional growths, sir."

"These green zones?"

"These are neuroRAM swaps, sir."

"What?"

"The virtual memory of the implant. Toulouse 10 routinely uses inactive regions of the host's brain, which is why it has such sensational performance."

"It works on my brain??"

"Yes, sir. You didn't know?"

"You're sitting in my brain?"

"Yes, sir. It's an implant."

"I know it's an implant. But that it processes on my brain...?"

He would have repeated the phrase about "my brain" more than once, but he reached the shaft. Marina was lying in the same position. He put down the plastic bucket (the water deformed the mono), knelt down next to the unconscious woman. He was weak, those few hundred meters there and back made him feel slightly dizzy and his mouth dry. I have a fever too, he realized, swallowing saliva with effort through his calloused throat.

He undressed and washed Marina. He wiped the dark petechiae with tissues taken from the containers in the toilets. It was blood, but with something else—a sticky, thick, stinking, slimy goo. It oozed especially from the lymph nodes; which turned out to be very hard and almost burned through the skin. The woman's skin did not behave like skin either: it turned black in contact with water and only after a few dozen seconds did it return to its usual paleness.

The cold concrete and icy water tore Marina from her coma. She woke up when he rolled her onto his coat, to wash her back now. She opened her eyes, moved her lips.

"Shh." He kissed her on the cheek. "Everything will be fine."

At this word, ground into phonetic pulp by centuries, she only smiled crookedly.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

She shook her head. He leaned down.

"What?"

"I'd bet my head that you'd be the only one to get out alive," she croaked.

He was glad that at least she had retained her sense of humor. He feared the psychological effects of the coma, the permanent disintegration of her personality.

"There's no justice in this world" he admitted.

"Son of a bitch."

Then he dressed her in clean clothes, wrapped her in his coat, put a bag under her head.

Seven hours until dusk. The Devil advised him to turn off the LEDpad, why drain the batteries unnecessarily. Styrofoam darkness wrapped them. Only at the very zenith of the concrete loomed a crescent-shaped patch of grey.

He climbed up there on old iron rungs. The hatch was not closed. He looked out, lifting it slowly. Some kind of park, I guess. He didn't recognize the area, especially from this frog-eyed perspective. It was not known whether the net reached here, so it was better not to risk it. He withdrew.

"You should close the hatch," the Devil advised. "I couldn't do it then —and it's a miracle that you both didn't fall."

"Did she fall?"

"Such things won't kill her now, sir. If she dies now, it will be from genetic conflict."

He supposed that the Devil had simply thrown her down.

He searched for a moment for some kind of bolt, lock, magnetic clasp, but there was nothing of the sort here.

Marina called to him in a whisper. He went down.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing, nothing."

"Where are we..."

"In the basement of the New Empire State Building."

"How on earth...?"

"Excuse me. In the subway."

"In the subway."

"Yes." He pointed with his hand, but realized that she wouldn't see him in the dark. (Although... maybe?). "Out of order."

Sighing, he lay down next to her, half-leaning against the wall: now he could whisper directly into her ear. While she was talking, he felt the fire of her unhealthy breath on the skin of her neck.

"Vittorio?"

"He turned to dust."

"Delicate."

"He went to God." Who were you to him?

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you fed me that story about a street mercenary, and I don't believe in such devotion to Bushido."

"The risk was included in the cost."

"Hmm. He parked the car there, just to cover your escape. Which, on top of that, he could only have a faint hope for."

"Vittorio..."

"Yes." She snorted.

"So what, will I survive?" Now she was sarcastic.

"Even the Devil doesn't know that."

"What?"

"I mean medical programs from my implant. So far, you've survived multiple

fatal shots. You didn't even have scars. He infected you with himself."

"That's why. I thought..."

"No, it's because of his bionano. The implant tells me he gave you a full copy, not some profiled catalysts like I did then. Do you recognize OVR yet?"

"What? No."

"That's how you'll know it's crystallized. The military version. By the way, it falls under the New Arms Proliferation Act. Who were you to him?"

For a moment, just a hot breath.

"How do you think I found out about Jason's death?"

"He was his father."

"Yes. A short contract. Then it all fell apart. But he stayed in the records. Then... He suddenly appeared as an ex-Shadow. My phone was turned off. He came personally to the last address. Jason was killed. I was a little torn apart, I admit. He pulled everything out, he knows how to do that. Running away, what else. Here you come in and talk nonsense about Chigueza and December. A farce."

"You defend Chigueza? You spied for her."

"Whatever you say."

"You spied, you spied. Worse: you sabotaged. You let us into that channel with Contact and the orbital telepaths, just to calibrate Prayer for her. You lied to my face. Do you realize that it's most likely because of you that we're now killing ourselves in the Wars? General Kleist would crucify you alive."

"Shut up, Hunt."

But Nicholas was already quite irritated by this.

"Are you in love with this Chigueza or something?"

She bucked under her cloak. "Don't make me mad," she snapped. "She murdered my child."

"Her?"

"Who? Langolian was afraid I'd fall apart."

"Yeah, you did."

"You don't believe me?"

"I'm noticing a certain, um, ambivalence of feelings."

"At least believe in the instinct of self-preservation: I am a prime target myself."

He laughed quietly, even without effort, with a kind of bitter sincerity.

"Is that how you imagine it? So what, Langolian gives orders to the police, the FBI, McFly? The US Air Force?" he snorted. "Another amateur conspiracy theorist."

"What do you want, you consider me a spy."

"But that is still no reason to shoot without mercy in crowded streets. I would say quite the opposite."

"Someone gave the order. Do you have any doubts? You saw your own photo next to mine in the news. Apparently Maria is powerful."

He laughed again.

"Powerful...!"

"If you are so smart, tell me who."

He blinked into the darkness, smoothing his non-existent mustache with invisible fingers.

"You ask who," he muttered, becoming serious. "You ask, who has power. They say different things. Officially, power belongs to the elected representatives of the people, all those intermediaries of the social will, the term focal points of public opinion. But even the people do not really believe in it themselves, the myth of democracy has been devalued: or even aristocracy. Those who consider themselves somewhat more sophisticated point to the true nature of the era of Economic Wars and, using the post-Marxist method, draw conclusions about

the real sources of power: the owners of capital, Chiguezas and super-Chiguezas. It would therefore be a kind of economic oligarchy. However, the more inquisitive ones dig deeper into technocracy: a new myth is already circulating: that power is ours."

"Ours? I mean, whose?"

"'Theirs' —because I no longer belong to this caste, I must remember to speak in the third person, I was exiled, I lost this power, or rather its illusion, the mutual appearance in which, I admit, I believed for a very long time. 'Them' —I am talking about hired operators, a class of specialists necessary for both elected representatives and financial autocrats. These immortal experts flow freely from one hierarchy to another, everyone must refer to them as presidents of states and presidents of corporations. They cannot and do not know how to deal with details, they do not know about them. In today's times, everything depends precisely on these details, subtle details of long-term processes, incomprehensible to the average voter or shareholder. Even if one or another expert is knocked down and ground into dust by the mills of power, he will be immediately replaced by another, without any difference to the public, because in the long run they are perfectly interchangeable; but them as a class, them as an element of the machine —there is no way to eliminate them."

"So you say that it is you, you... that they have the power?"

"That is what the more inquisitive observers and most specialists themselves would say."

"But not you, right? So what? There are demiurges even more deeply hidden?"

"No. Understand: the power of our times —even the US president, even his sponsors, even the southern autocrats —is not power in the sense of last century, at most a pale memory of it. Three-quarters, if not more, of the former personal competences of these bodies have slipped through their fingers and gained the status of 'system rules.'"

"What are these rules?"

"You're mocking me. Wrongfully. I'm really trying to explain it to you. It's something that doesn't need to be —and can't be —enforced, because it is an

immanent, structural feature of the system. Certain systems above a certain level of complexity tend to fall into homeostatic states —this undoubtedly also applies to all political, legal, financial and socio-cultural connections. The system is becoming independent and increasingly leaning toward the *status quo*. There is no censorship, no one has issued a ban —and try to oppose, go against it: no one will hear, no one will pay attention, no one will remember. Not consciously at all. Without reflection, without thinking, automatically. Incompatible elements bounce off a wall. If you want to see it according to thought: psychomemes of non-parallel trends do not enter the pool, do not mix, do not combine. I don't even know what to call it, the word doesn't exist. It's certainly not a democracy, not an oligarchy, not even a cryptocracy, because there's no secret body secretly issuing orders to the appropriate executors. It executes itself. Pedecracy...? Pantocracy...? Metaxocracy...?"

"Wait, what are you trying to say? That we are governed by some historical laws, as strong and impersonal as the laws of physics? Not at the level of historiosophical analyses, in the assessment of centuries and epochs, but in every single second of economic, political, cultural decision...?"

"Isn't that so? Isn't that so? Do you perhaps think that civilization develops in a random manner? That there are no dependencies between the individual stages of its development? That capitalism is just as likely to appear after feudalism as slavery after democracy? That industrial culture explodes at any time and place? You know that it doesn't. There are dependencies, cause-and-effect chains, laws of development, feedback loops. Just like the laws of embryogenesis or cosmology, it's just as hard. No man established them and no man will change them; at most they can rebel, like cells against the organism of which they are parts —and you know how that ends. Everything is a matter of time scales. As long as it went slowly, self-regulation occurred in cycles of many years, even centuries —it was not so visible, we maintained the appearance of freedom of decision. However, the world has shrunk, the system has closed, the density of internal connections has exceeded a critical value, the margin of maneuver has disappeared. If you act differently, you lose; you have to act as the winning trend dictates."

"Do I have to? Do I have to?"

"Of course, you always have the possibility to choose the wrong solution with full premeditation, to act to your own detriment; such freedom remains with you."

But who acts like that? The paths are obvious. You don't even rationalize in this way anymore —these are reflexes, intuition. In everyday life, it's the same. You know. There is no compulsion, no one is ordered —but try to break away from the canons, think cross-country, non-parallel: somehow... it is not appropriate. Who will you point the finger at, who will you blame? There are no candidates for bad characters. There are only victims. This is nothing new, people were already aware of this trap in the twentieth century, even revolutionary ideologies were created against this background, a certain Ted 'The Unabomber' Kaczynski tore people to pieces in the name of freedom from these 'systemic rules.' It did not help much, the system swallowed him, Kaczynski himself became the rule. You can trace the genealogy of ideas back to how metaxocracy was sensed —for example Rothschild in his bionomics."

"I don't understand. So in the end —who gave the order?"

"I explained it to you: it doesn't matter at all —the trend will always find a way to implement it, sooner or later. Along the least line of resistance. The direct commander most likely has no idea of the situation at all and his name would mean nothing to you. However, if you somehow caught up with him and put a gun to his temple and asked who gave him the order, he would answer you quite honestly that no one did. You can't follow it, forget about the 'chain of command' and similar categories."

"You're the one justifying them! You must hate me."

True —hatred surged inside him, raising adrenaline, tensing his muscles. With an effort of will he held back the reflexes of rage.

"Quiet," he hissed "don't scream."

"Ambivalence of feelings, damn you."

"You defended her, didn't you?"

She must have had to turn her head, he couldn't feel the fire of her breath anymore.

"You don't get it at all, do you?" she snorted. "Your reaction when someone has done you wrong is this: to take the position of the victim and exact your own justice. Have you ever hated anyone in your entire life? I'm not a victim, I knew what I was getting into; if Chigneza was using me, it wasn't to a greater

extent than I was using her. Their is no administration of justice. The victim is Jason, and I hate Maria Chigneza. Don't insult me here by making her out to be some demonic manipulator; I had free will. I would have killed her entire family with satisfaction."

He shook his head.

"You and Krasnov pose as implacable enemies, but in reality you could be his spiritual daughter. You both have the same Nietzschean perversion. Without a personalized object of hatred you would feel lost. The world is not like that, you react inadequately."

She sighed.

"Maybe. I don't know anymore. Was I like that before?"

"I didn't really know you before."

"What?" she laughed "do you know me now?"

"Hmm, that's strange, not long ago I would have given a lot to be able to look into your thoughts, and today... I don't want to know anything, I'm sated with uncertainty."

She reached out and felt his face with her hot hand; at first he instinctively ducked, but then remained motionless.

"Now you're basking in me" she whispered. "It's not even like lying in such closeness. The New Empire State Building! You'll lie, but you won't lie."

"Yes. It's embarrassing."

"Distance is necessary."

"Yes."

"Give false ideas a chance."

"The Snow Queen, perfection of body and mind, beautiful as a scalpel."

"The fallen angel of power, a young cynic with the smile of an old scoundrel."

"Young?"

"God, so young."

"You're joking now."

"You're not smiling anymore. I can feel that you're in such a gloomy mood."

"What mood am I supposed to be in?"

"You're holding it against me."

"Of course. Looking into your motives —what do you think I would find?"

"Black."

"Black."

"Maybe not in yours? You're really a pig."

"I know."

"Indeed, you know. A pig anyway."

"There are no decent men anymore."

"Yeah. Not anymore. Damn. Now for the rest of my life... which is probably not long... I'll be..."

"Okay, okay."

"I'm fine!"

"Shhh, you can cry."

"Piss off."

"No. Marina."

"Christ, I was always sure he despised me. I would never... and still..."

"Shhh."

He moved his head unconsciously. Such flashes: the gentle touch of a man's lips on the back of his neck; the sea; a premonition of inevitable death; words of loss; a fire in his throat.

None of them were the kind of people who discovered their own feelings by throwing out streams of emphatic descriptions of them. Everything they said, even if they thought of it as the truth, was already a distorted, reflected version. The meaning had to be read from the words unspoken, omitted.

When she fell asleep (or maybe fell back into a feverish lethargy?), he carefully freed his right arm and moved away to the opposite wall, as far away from her nightmares as possible. He checked the LEDpad to see if there was a reply from Qurant; but there wasn't.

In that brief flash of light he saw Marina, huddled in the bend of a concrete box, wrapped in his coat. Black hair, pale skin, sickly blushes, she looked as if the blood vessels in her face had burst (marble veined with quartz).

In such stroboscopic illumination, after a long darkness, he saw it much more clearly: the sculpture of her body was changing. The alien bionano, unleashed, was carving wild paths in her DNA.

He lifted the stump of his hand to his nose, inhaled. Of course, he couldn't yet smell that characteristic smell of rot, the sweet prelude to gangrene. He even jumped out from under the MUI for a moment to bypass the filters. In any case, he had to be in the hospital, and quickly. So did she.

Why that manhole? Where exactly was the Devil leading them?

"As far away from the A-V network, sir. I knew you wouldn't get far. That monad made things worse. All that was left was the subway manhole cover, and I took advantage of the opportunity."

"Is the monad up there?"

"Was she there then, sir. If it weren't for your condition..."

"Great."

"It could actually work to our advantage. In fact, if you would just let me explain —There is a very simple way..."

"You better not say anything more. Give me the scan archive here."

S^{CHATZ} spoke:

“Dr. Marina Vassone has undoubtedly done a wonderful job and we all owe her admiration and gratitude, without her intuition and persistence we would not be here at all.”

A few applauses and a whistle.

“With this in mind, we must nevertheless seriously consider the scientific foundations of her theses and the research methodology adopted. There are many issues that require renewed, deeper consideration here. For example, I ask myself the following question: to what extent are monads actual psychomeme constructs, and to what extent are they only intentional entities? The obvious limitations allow us only indirect observations and all conclusions drawn on their basis should be treated with great caution. Metaphor prevails, reasoning with extensive analogies. Basic data is desperately lacking. Dr. Vassone herself started it, imposing on us the model of the ‘ether of thought’ and evolutionary psychomeme machines. We have fallen into this memotrend and somehow we cannot shake it off.”

He leaned toward the audience, smiling uncertainly.

“But aren’t competing interpretations really possible? One can start from another property of thought: obvious entropy —and propose another analogy: the model of a gas, a liquid. The free propagation of psychomemes indicates a striving to equalize “pressures,” levels of organization. These tendencies are locally overcome as a result of the constant emission of new psychomemes by us, humans, our brains, and similar neurogenerators. Hence, thought varies locally in terms of “density” and form of modulation. Depending on the preferred approach, we can define a psychomeme as a particle, a wave, the frequency of vibrations of a superstring (I have heard such descriptions in the corridors), an energy state, a cell of an organism, a type of metaneuron, etc.” He waved his hand. “But this does not change the image of thought itself: a strongly entropic system, restrained from a kind of thermal death only by interactions with the nervous systems of living organisms. In this model (which moves away from Eccles’ interactionism toward Popperian emergence from the brain), the existence of Dr. Vassone’s monads as self-organizing, evolving homeostats of thought —is unnecessary. What does Ockham tell us here: they are not plants, not animals, not intelligences —but turbulences, densities, crystallizations. Coherent in content? Yes, at our level —because these are the contents of our minds. Displaced

How? Like this: how storms move in the atmosphere, eddies on the surface of water reservoirs. Facts are satisfactorily explained based on much more modest hypotheses, the postulate of life at the level of thought is unnecessary.”

“Are you saying that Vassone is wrong?”

“I don’t have data for that either. Many mythologies can be derived here, but scientific methodology requires that we stick to the poorest theories. Because if we are looking for life there, if we are looking for God there (you know this anecdote), then within my interpretation we also receive omniscient theories. After all, we know the Gaia hypothesis well. Hurricanes, storms, tornadoes —forms of organization of the atmosphere and ocean —are not independent entities in it, but submanifestations of a global organism, a caring homeostat. This is the biosphere —let alone thought, where the speed of internal interactions is almost infinite! Shouldn’t we then look for consciousness in itself —in Thought? The greatest possible homeostat. What is closer to the idea of God? He is everywhere and nowhere; He was, is and will be; He knows our thoughts; He is us; He is love, because He is every feeling; He creates from form, from the Word; the beginning and end of all ideas; Thought. Nice, isn’t it?”

“Monads are His organs?”

“I am only showing the possible range of interpretations” Schatz got irritated. “I would like to stick as closely as possible to hard data and if I speculate, I would not do it for maximum effectiveness, but for the greatest threats, so that we are prepared for the worst scenarios. I remind you that this is not a purely academic discussion. It will have certain practical consequences and rational pessimism is advisable. That is what I would like to focus on: the probable threat.”

DON’T move, sir,” the Devil hissed, somehow so firmly that after the first twitch, that Hunt actually froze.

“What?”

“One moment.”

Wump, wump, wump, three heartbeats.

“Yes. They’re coming,” Lucifer declared.

“What...? Who?”

“I’ll amplify.”

He pointed a curved claw up the shaft. Nicholas instinctively raised his head. His ears began to ring with low, arrhythmic noises, most reminiscent of the sound of sand being poured onto plastic in an irregular stream. It was only after a few seconds that he recognized the resampling of human footsteps.

“How many?” he whispered on a short exhale.

“Four plus.”

“Damn.”

“They finally traced the NEti network records, sir. An order or brilliant sneakers. Either way —professionals. They don’t expect us to still be sitting here, they would have approached it differently.”

A whoosh-whoosh around the hatch.

Hunt rushed into the saving darkness of the tunnel. Lucifer ran ahead, carrying the light, showing the way. Hunt made great leaps.

Four, five, six, slower and slower... he stopped and turned on his heel.

He stood breathless over the unconscious Marina.

“What do I do?” he shouted in OVR, desperate, furious. With a shaking hand he mechanically reached for his upper lip, now bare. He felt nothing, dead wood: it was the right one.

“Run! Let Baryshnikov take you! You won’t be able to lift her anyway! You’re weakened. Run!”

”Stupid, stupid, stupid...”

”You have no chance, sir. They’ll kill you —if that’s what they have orders for.”

“They’ll kill you.”

“Yes.”

“They’ll kill you.”

“They’ll kill, sir.”

Swallow, swallow, swallow, swush, swush. They were coming. The hatch creaked.

Hunt rushed to Marina. He turned her on her side, yanked her coat out from under her limp body. Lights! He turned on the LEDpad wrapped around his right forearm. With his left hand, he rummaged through the pockets hidden in the folds of black material. Furiously, he scooped out the contents. Finally, he spotted them. With clumsy fingers, he grabbed one, put it to his neck, pressed it. Psh! Ice in his veins. Aa-aa...! He was collapsing. The collapse of the mind.

He remembered how they would jump in here. He remembered it clearly and distinctly (after all, only a minute’s difference). First two, then three. They would shoot. Memory of short pain (the manager will quickly soothe), vivid, complete—but memory of experience is not an experience. So approximations, reflections, associations; he did not suffer. As if he were fainting. He would fall into a lake of hot darkness.

So he remembered death—one of its sides, the one of pain, of life. Various kinds of this and that. Memories overlapped. In the hip, in the head, in the head again, but mainly: in the chest and in the chest. They shot accurately. Shadows? Certainly well-packed with nano (that jump!). Marina, because she lay motionless, was a secondary target, an indirect threat—and they turned their machines on her in the second place, usually Hunt did not see her death. Which—when he did—was very ineffective anyway: they tore up her inert body, calmly exploded her head. But by then, he was usually already deep in the darkness.

Nicholas strained his memory toward increasingly pale reminiscences. These were already coming without rhyme or reason, broken into individual bundles of sensations, sequences torn from chains of cause and effect and sequences of consequences. Sometimes pain, sometimes not; flashes of distant memories. He deliberately tried to recall specific events, starting from assumed associations and blocking opposing ones; he reflexively used techniques trained in Unconscious Assertiveness Courses.

He heard how those upstairs were still doing something with the hatch. He moved away to the very wall. He was sweating. His hand, deprived of feeling, was making some uncoordinated movements. The flood of parallel memories was cutting him off from reality. Of course, he could completely turn away from this future-memory—but he just didn't want to. The Devil was screaming at him to run away, that they would kill him. Hunt was driving him away with a hand in a white glove, shadows were dancing on the walls. He turned off the LEDpad. But even that was half-conscious, mechanical, because...

Sixth finger, quickly, menu, editor. He opened the construct of the simplest representation, a clumsy cube in 3D. Inside, a clumsy puppet, kneeling. Zoom, touch the operator. But he couldn't handle it with his left hand, the movements were imprecise, too abrupt. He changed the setup again (fast, faster). Full transmission of body commands. He reset and started over. The first sequences were the simplest, here still a relatively narrow algorithm. Then he set up the ghostly puppets, ran between them five times... but it was getting light, they were opening the hatch, he had to finish. He glued the whole thing together with conditional operators, selected behavior scripts, described the hierarchy of goals—and it was too late, the first two jumped.

He launched this macro without even leaving the edit mode—Baryshnikov automatically used Ranger. Hunt's right-handedness made a difference in that Nicholas's left arm was less muscular and innervated, but with such a short distance to the target the Ranger easily compensated for this.

Now the program had to choose the moment: that split second when they still couldn't see anything beyond the curvature of the manhole walls and the shooter from below had the advantage of first movement.

Tshk! Tshk!

They hit the concrete dead (their eyes, the only weak point in their armor—even a blade would penetrate night goggles).

Then: two small shock grenades. He didn't have time to see them; he didn't have to, he remembered where they would fall. He dug them up in the air, aiming them at the subway tunnel. It flashed, but Nicholas's eyes were already squeezed shut. The waves went mostly through the tunnel, but this was all a closed space, so it shook him hard anyway.

Nevertheless, the macro was still executing. He swapped the blade for the ergocarbine and took three short steps back. In the light falling from above, Hunt could see the yellow logo on the vest of the robbed corpse: SWAT. Maybe some small conflict of competences, he thought, himself still idle in Baryshnikov's grip. One had to hope they would devour each other. (Old associational paths do not grow over so easily.)

The next three were already falling. He did not shoot —they did. Definitely unorthodox tactics for SWAT. One of the bursts went through Marina's thighs. She started screaming, suddenly awake, then immediately lost consciousness again.

The air crackled with ricochets. Hunt had to be standing here. He did not remember managing to avoid injury: there was fog in this place, the curve went sharply upward. He waited out probable death, positioned motionless by the editor in the optimal pose —about zero point three seconds. Finally, it was reduced to a graze in the left calf and a shot through the shoulder. Fortunately, the right one.

The implant calculated and made decisions, the algorithm had to be completed. Body.exe. Yes: seven breathless steps (he remembered how they sometimes released odorless and colorless poison gas at that moment). Also like this: a blow to the neck —turn —roll —burst —kneel —burst —done.

The blow must have been strong and although the ergo carbine cushioned it a bit, Hunt's hand went numb. He couldn't feel any now.

As soon as the macro stopped, he tripped over a corpse. It's hard not to trip when they cover almost the entire floor —four corpses and two unconscious.

He inhaled reflexively. Nothing. Good, another lucky reduction.

"Shoulder!" he hissed, because he was tearing terribly from the fresh wound.

Someone was shouting from above, from the street. The rest of the water was flowing out of the chopped plastic bucket.

Marina, conscious again, tried to get up.

"They're about to..."

“You won’t make it, lie down.”

”Indeed,” she sank back onto the concrete, tangled in Nicholas’s coat.

Hunt threw away the ergocarbine and knelt over the stunned agent. Having ripped off his helmet, he rested his head on his knee. In his left hand, to which feeling was just returning in the form of a stabbing pain, he took the Corpse-Thief. He pressed its muzzle against the back of the groaning man’s head and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp crack, the agent trembled, drops of bright blood glistened on his exposed neck. Then Hunt put the Dead Man’s lips to his right wrist. Hiccup! Of course he didn’t feel anything.

He picked up the bag, put the contents of his coat pockets scattered on the concrete sprayed with blood and water, including the knife and the Corpse-Thief, into it, then ran into the tunnel and along the tunnel, toward the platform. Baryshnikov supported his motor functions. The bag rubbed his injured shoulder – every now and then a spark of pain shot out from the neighboring, unblocked nerves. Marina’s screams chased him. He listened hard. She cursed him with some strange satisfaction in her hoarse voice.

Baryshnikov recognized the tearing of some muscle. Hunt turned off the medical message. He waited for the connection to be established. The Corpse-Thief’s editor was called Master of Puppets and for now, it remained curled up into the the military software manufacturer company’s logo: a bony hand with strings tied to its fingers. Hunt had no intention of playing with any manual editing anymore and simply threw MoP into the implant manager, reserving a separate dialogist.

As soon as the puppet appeared on the strings (marked, *no-men omen*, as AGENT1), Nicholas mumbled commands into OVR. The SWAT officer, with Marina in his arms, caught up with him several dozen meters beyond the station. As he passed Hunt, Marina, gliding along the surface of consciousness, shouted something to Nicholas about “savior armies.” He had to make allowances for December, he thought.

He, in turn, caught up with them at the fourth manhole. AGENT1 left Marina down there and climbed up himself to open the hatch. Hunt reached for the MoP icon with his right hand. In OVR, he had all his fingers and could move them: the nerves remained. He intended to connect the system macro definitions and shortcuts to them from the phantom sixth finger, the finger he inherited from

the default.

He touched the icon —the Metallica classic started in the background —and looked through the agent's eyes. The hatch was closed, just as Nicholas remembered.

So this is where it will go, he thought, such is the true path —and at that moment his memory stopped working the other way. All that remained were memories of memories.

Apparently Nicholas Hunt was not a particularly high target.

"Devil," he said, looking up toward the manhole; a sickle-shaped shaft of anemic light shone from the fan-shaped light above the white glove. "Give me a map of the area, 3D, with NEti zones and police and corporate networks. Overlay what you remember from the CDC reports on urban madness residues. I've looked at the maps, you have scans. If you find anything about barriers, riots, the Crowd, and the like, overlay that too. Move it in real-time."

"Yes, sir," the Devil said, bowed, and did so.

Necropolis

SUCH trends have their own logic, there is a certain rhythm to an inexorable sequence of events that reminded Hunt of baroque dance melodies. Maybe these are indeed consequences of subconscious aesthetic consents, as Colleen suggested? Necropolis. Because when he saw this beast through AGENT1's eyes, a half-naked pheno-arabian rubbing its back against the wall of a church, he didn't hesitate for a second.

So the SWAT guy had his hands free from then on. Nicholas gave him the Corpse-Thief —the trend was developing.

Next came a giant pheno-asian, seven feet of regularly stimulated muscles —and that one with Marina in mind. Now they could all run. To tell the truth, Hunt was the one who slowed them down the most.

It was getting dark. The billboards were reprogrammed to display warnings about the Plague and Crowds, and the dirty sky was filled with calls to stay home, quotes from the Assembly Prohibition Order, and suggestive animations intended for the illiterate and immigrants. Madness reached the celestial spheres.

To avoid the omnipresent cameras, they had to move through districts outside of NEti. The police were installing their networks, but the savages who had lived here for centuries were destroying them quickly and thoroughly. The Devil was marking a detailed route, adjusting it to the data Hunt was gradually reading from his right-hand LEDpad. The CDC issued irregular announcements for all major cities in the US, in which the locations of the more powerful monads were given. Of course, the Center for Infectious Diseases did not use this

name—they had their own neologisms, very scientific, and journalists had their own, coined by editorial memocists, very easy to remember. Based on these reports, Nicholas' Toulouse Manager mapped the area and plotted safe routes. They were slightly ahead of the CDC, because Hunt had given him access to all the conference files, and the Devil extrapolated the locations of some of the monads based on speculative animal characteristics. But this did not always work. The lethargic monad that had been sitting on Pelham Manor suddenly disappeared after two days. The Brooklyn Mordmonad circled the wide figure eight from Remsen Village to East Flatbush, but sometimes it stopped for a few hours (hundreds dead). Numerous harmless mood monads of a decidedly plant type increased and decreased their pressure on the minds in their grasp in uncoordinated cycles. These mood monads covered almost the entire megapolis, and Hunt, believing in his Fungus and Lucifer, decided not to bother with them. They walked through the suburbs, avoiding only the largest and most dangerous monads: suicidal, homicidal, depressive, catatonic, deprivation, religious, personality. Four-Leaf was a few dozen miles beyond the actual suburbs of New York, in the main strip of enclaves, and Hunt reckoned that once they left the poverty zones and entered the districts of the "second third-quarters," he would be able to easily find some means of transport (people there had to travel by car anyway); after all—he had the Corpse-Thief.

He had the Corpse-Thief, and he made use of it. At first, he saw it this way: they would sneak through in the smallest possible group, as quickly as possible, as secretly as possible. AGENT1 walked on the lookout (Vittorio's old position); AGENT2 (that pheno-arab with a flayed back) was the rear guard; AGENT3 carried Marina. Nicholas put his coat back on, because he didn't see himself in it in the recordings of the Special Tactics CAV attack, Vassone was immortalized exactly like that: in black, carried in his arms, unconscious/killed. He asked her to try to figure out something with her bionano and change her physiognomy, as Vittorio did—but either she didn't hear through the fog of fever, or she didn't want to, or she couldn't. AGENT3 carried her in his powerful arms as if in a cradle, her head bobbed in the air almost at the height of Hunt's head, usually completely limp, her short black hair ruffled by the wind. After a long conversation with her in the subway, Nicholas thought that her condition was improving, but now he had doubts: she was weak, so very weak, and conscious less and less often. Her face burned an evil red. Every now and then he would touch through AGENT3 to check her temperature. Marina was scalding him. The Devil/medi-analyzer calculated that her brain should have boiled a long

time ago. He was walking next to the pheno-asiasn in the shadow of the wall under the buildings of the disused printing house when a police car jumped out at them from a side street. The spotter immediately caught their attention. Hunt instinctively raised his hand to shield his eyes, and instinctively with his right hand. In the bright light, bloody spots flared on a white glove with three fingers fluttering loosely. Distorted images flickered on the semicircular LEDcrystal.

The car stopped, the cops got out. Both had rifles in their hands, both aimed at Hunt and AGENT3. They walked on arcs that were receding from each other, five, eight meters to minimize mutual interference. He saw them mumbling something into microphones in their helmets.

“Get Unit One here!” hissed Nicholas in OVR. “Hide Unit Two.”

“Now,” whispered the Devil.

“Please put the woman on the ground,” one of the policemen spoke through the car’s speakers. “Please move away from each other and kneel! Slowly! Hands in plain sight!”

Nicholas was aware that such a police car was a real megascanner, and that a three-dimensional A-V scan of the entire incident was sent in real time to the nearest police station, with copies to several other places; and that no matter what he did, the information would spread throughout the system anyway.

“Let’s go,” he growled in OVR.

The Devil, wisely, said nothing (now he was humble and quiet).

The car repeated its call over and over. The policemen were approaching Hunt, AGENT3 and Marina symmetrically from both sides, at a ninety-degree angle. What about behind them? The wall. What was this going to be? To the execution, that is.

Nicholas looked around for other passers-by who could possibly join in. True, a few were watching from a distance, individual savages, but it was clear that they were rather happy that the cops had picked on someone else, and if anything, they would rather run away than interfere. From the roof of the printing house (two dirty-smoke fires were burning there) teenage gangsters were shouting, but so rhythmically, and standing so close to each other that they were most likely also unusable. From some windows of old, brick houses, slightly cu-

rious residents were looking out (they turned down their TVs and compaks to hear the details of the expected brawl), but they, on the other hand, were too far away.

He did not see AGENT1, and he did not know whether to worry about it or be happy. The police were of course in full gear, absorbent armor, monomembranes. There was no point in counting on intermediate solutions, half-measures. Now he waited for the Devil to start whispering to him: “Kill them, kill them,” but the Devil was silent.

Hunt bit his lip, clenched his fists —the physical one and the virtual one. He was terrified —but he couldn’t tell the difference: from himself or from one of the two cops, who were undoubtedly nervous.

He could almost hear the noise with which the police computers were grinding data and comparing the received image with the registry of wanted persons.

There was no point in thinking here: they’ll fire some stun gun and it’ll be over for me.

He reached into the OVR toward AGENT 1.

”As soon as he can, both.”

He probably already could, because almost immediately both policemen fell to the asphalt, both with their necks shot through.

The gangsters fell silent for a moment, then started whistling loudly. Torn shouts came from the residential buildings.

The police car turned on all its lights, turned around, and sped toward the shooter’s supposed hideout.

So that’s how you become a murderer, Hunt thought, leaping over the corpses. Or maybe I was one before? Was that on the subway —was that self-defense? I guess so. So why not this one? Does it matter that they were all —innocent? It should.

But for God’s sake, how do you defend yourself against a trend without harming the innocent...?

There are only victims here.

So am I the murderer or not?

Depends on which trend I'm judged under.

He would have laughed, if he hadn't been out of breath as he ran through the maze of side streets after the Devil and AGENT3. Another panicky escape. The last few days had turned into a patchwork in his memory: sudden races for life and long hours of fear and waiting. But any escape will eventually fail, no Efes, no random monad, no incinerated Vittorio, no enemy's stupidity —once. That's it. This is Russian roulette. It can't go on like this any longer.

So Hunt changed tactics.

He gave orders. From now on, every encountered beast of prey would be put under the cold lips of the Corpse-Thief, regardless of age, sex, health, or degree of immersion in thought. Before the Moon, blue with cold, emerged from behind the skyscrapers into the sky, for a Spanish-language warning about the Crowd, MoP carried twenty-seven puppets on its strings.

The implant did not have ready-made programs for managing tactical units in its memory (did they even exist?) and had to improvise.

"First of all," Hunt told Lucifer, "I don't want any more surprises. Cover the largest possible zone as tightly as possible. Collect weapons. Destroy cameras. Map the mind. Check the cars."

"Yes, sir."

The Corpse-Thief was still in the hands of AGENT1, but the SWAT man was no longer in the vanguard, but in the very center of the Zone, at Hunt's side. Nicholas had taken him out of the manager's control and left him at his personal disposal. With the other AGENTS surrounding them in a multiple and ever-widening cordon, one was effectively left with only one function: that of the Puppet Master's enforcer.

Hunt asked the editor about the Corpse-Thief's magazine capacity and the number of cartridges. The answer chilled Nicholas.

"Nineteen hundred and seventy-two," the Master of Puppets replied.

Meanwhile, night fell, it cooled down, the intensity of smells diminished

(slums stink, that's really the only characteristic they all have in common). Hunt, surprised, realized that he really liked the night. There was something in this muteness of sounds and images that spoke to the aesthetic core of his nature now. That there was less to see and less to hear, greater uncertainty of experience and —greater loneliness.

Only he saw the closer AGENTS more clearly, those from the inner circle. Because they were no longer even passers-by, no longer local savages —the Devil was taking care of them with the hands of scouts and external guards. Nicholas was unable to see this without rummaging through the sensors of the captured beasts, which he had no great desire to do. They walked, he, AGENT1 and the giant with Marina in his arms, in a bubble of deserted space, additionally covered by carpets of urban shadows, because the Devil always chose the darkest passages, the narrowest streets, passages forgotten by God and man, canyons of windowless walls, the foot of concrete slopes, where only garbage and the stench of urine reside.

Despite this, the night pleased Hunt. That he did not have to speak, that he did not have to listen to the words of others, that no one's sight bound him, no one's thoughts deformed him. For he received nothing from the beasts he had taken over, or at least nothing that would immediately come to the surface, except for sporadic quanta of physiological sensations. These people, as he understood, had been once and for all, completely broken by thought and now they only absorbed everything like psychomeme sponges, automatically —and senselessly —performing whatever slipped into their executive neurostructures. MoP blocked these orders and imposed its own. Nevertheless, there was no indication that the beasts were even aware of the fact that their bodies had been taken into captivity.

Only AGENT1, because he was not an animal, was more disruptive to thought. Hunt briefly saw himself in his imagination, and as a result moved him a few meters forward. It was one thing to look through someone else's eyes; another to see his version of the world.

Only bad things came from Marina. She was burning herself at the stake and slitting Vittorio's throat, and the like. He consciously avoided her gaze so as not to open the associative channels. So when he finally looked at her more closely in the next zone of lunar-advertising glow, he sucked air through his teeth with a hiss.

The nano was disintegrating her. The body had lost the memory of the form. Apparently, some of the RNAdation functions could not be blocked and the rapid cancer was now processing Vassone's body into a pointless accident of preprogrammed forms. The face was the first to be forgotten (or maybe every change was just that much more visible here), and Marina's visage was now a hideous mask of created bones and muscles, an elfin caricature of human physiognomy. The entire skeleton was pupating in a similar way. Asymmetrical outgrowths forced the limbs to permanently bend into some absurd shapes: one hand behind the back, the other to the side, like a broken wing, while the legs were arthritically curled up, the spine into a scoliotic arch. He couldn't look at it. Before he could think, he pulled out Mood Editor and cut out the monster-Marina. The pheno-asian walked from then on with empty hands, hanging at his sides.

What good was it, the image remained, deeply imprinted in memory. Hospital! She had to be diagnosed, her body cleansed, maybe she would still come through...

He didn't ask the Devil for the prognosis, because he would certainly give the worst. Instead, he asked him about the nearest medical center.

"Clinic for unemployed savages, sir, a facility of the Skye Foundation. Of course, low standards, not for any medic, they don't have insurance here."

"What is the Skye Foundation?"

"An old philanthropic endeavor of a pharmaceutical company."

"Oh, of course." Indeed, the pharmaceutical industry has been the largest donor to charitable endeavors in America from the beginning, especially donating a lot to non-profit medicine. This was one of the pillars of the constant memetic offensive, engineers hired by the giants of the chemical stimulant market worked persistently to reverse the associative trends.

The Mother Teresa Clinic was housed in a former school building, with a basketball court next to it. Although the last public schools had been closed only a few years ago, those in the city's "first three-quarters" zones had collapsed at the very beginning, as soon as the Indirect Education Act had come into effect —and apart from the court, there was little to remind us of the building's previous purpose.

Theoretically, the children of savages should receive an equivalent education through free educational channels, but everyone knew that parents did not enforce this obligation. Well, there was no other way: the budget, to the surprise of most congressmen, turned out to have a tensile strength limit; and children do not vote. Besides —what children would vote for a school?

The clinic had lights on in all its windows —Hunt could see that, because he had at least one AGENT on each side of it. A holo animation warning against street gatherings burned above the main entrance. On the door was sprayed: SHOTGUN FROM THE FIELD. The arrow pointed toward the ajar doors of the gym. Someone was standing in the crack, smoking a cigarette.

There must be a lot of people inside, Hunt mused. Sick people, animals. (What do they do with animals?) There was no point in going in alone, every hospital certainly had a few old, deeply rooted plant monads of suffering and sadness.

The Devil handed him a map, Nicholas checked the AGENTs' placement. They surrounded the clinic and Hunt's hideout in two concentric circles: a wrecked bus parked on the right side on the other side of the field. The circles overlapped on this pitch, but it was quiet, dark, empty, the Master of Puppets, on Lucifer's advice, had prudently kept his army in the shadows. An excess of caution, because how could a local wandering around this neglected area at night recognize the state of mind of these men and women? How on earth could he see the connections? They existed only in OVR and on the level of thought. Besides, every AGENT lurking in the darkness counted four savages within the Zone, including one probable beast that would most likely go to the eager snout of the Corpse-Thief; of which only the smoker was in the inner circle.

Hunt handed Lucifer the map (it seemed to be drawn on tanned human skin). He sat down in the corner of the bus, just below the driver's seat, grabbed the MoP icon, stuffed it into his mouth (it was large but brittle, tasted like paper), then swallowed it. Metallica roared from the inside of the bones (End of passion play, crumbling away, I'm your source of self-destruction!).

He took a deep breath. They were entering. Me —me —me —me —me —me —and me. A unsculpted, original Latino, dozing in the corner of the waiting room, saw him and raised a scream. Hunt aimed a shotgun at him and put his finger to his lips. Shh. The Latino (an orderly, or maybe a cleaner) fell silent. Hunt checked the reception and the adjacent rooms. While Hunt approached a

man smoking a cigarette in the half-open door to the gym, currently a trauma center for gangsters who had been shot at inaccurately, the pitch probably served as a parking lot in such cases.

The man, probably sculpted, a pheno-european, when he noticed the gun, threw it away and stomped on the fading cigarette. He was wearing a gray smock with the logo of the Skye Foundation on his chest. He did not, however, announce his affiliation with any juridical corporation.

“I’m listening.”

“I’d like to speak to the head of the clinic. The doctor pointed to the wall next to him, to the fluorescent graffiti.”

“The Celadon Prince.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you see? We are the vassals of the Celadon. Well, there are juridictors and juridictors.”

“I’m ecstatic. I’d like to speak to the director. The doctor looked again at the gun in Hunt’s right hand.”

“We didn’t get an announcement.”

“What?”

“This won’t make a good impression. You might want to think about your decision a bit. Otherwise, it’ll turn out to be a personal vendetta, the Prince will chirp you.”

Hunt withdrew for a moment with his breath, to the lungs, the diaphragm. He glanced at the external scan of AGENT17. It was a teenage savage covered in tattoos, with a pumped-up chest and muscle-enhanced legs. Mulatto, silver hair, camouflage clothes, a bit battered, bruise on temple.

He came back with a breath.

”You’re the manager,” he said. ”I didn’t come to kill you. I need help. How well equipped are you?”

"It doesn't look that bad. Maybe a skull fracture and concussion. Could you..."

"Do you have an N-spinnaker 200 or 300?"

"What? Yes. What are you..."

At that, AGENT3 and AGENT 1 ran out of the corner shadow.

The doctor gasped loudly, unable to tear his eyes away from the phenasian's torso.

"What's wrong with her..."

"You're leading the way, doctor. Quickly."

The final argument was probably the ergocarbine in the hands of AGENT1 and the ubiquitous "SWAT" prints on his black clothing. The doctor was clearly trying to draw some coherent conclusions, but within the information he had, it was impossible. So he surrendered to the unknown (the most reasonable reaction in this area) and nodded to all four strangers. Hunt followed him, simultaneously—Hunt was destroying the clinic's network and disconnecting its servers. He saw (he—he—and he) a total of four employees of the Skye clinic, all (minus the manager) unsculpted. He ripped off their phones. One even tried to protest, to interrupt Hunt, but the armed AGENT stepped in (Devilish synchronization!) and drove the nurse away. The clinic was pacified.

The patients, every single one of them, were deep in sleep, connected to autodimeters by venous catheters. Besides, he counted only five patients, of whom only one had not been admitted to the clinic due to a gunshot wound. This one, that one, had come here to give birth. He looked into the room where she was waiting to give birth, monitored by machines so old that they required separate LCD screens. She was also asleep, her naked belly bulging, her skin dangerously taut. The animalistic obscenity of the scene crushed Hunt's crystalline aesthetics, he grimaced, and stepped back. What if she went into labor... Only here, in the zones of hereditary unemployment, was an incubus a luxury, and prenatal sterilization a taboo. Such savages often sneak into NETi districts, you can see them begging there with their bellies demonstratively exposed and their hands stretched out in supplication with transfer gloves pulled on.

"There was a recommendation from the CDC," the doctor explained in re-

sponse to Hunt's question "to keep them all in sleepless torpor as long as possible, that it helps. Whoever you can —send them away; especially those who are brain-dead. Hospitals, first aid centers —these are places where crowding many people in a small space is unavoidable. They would have to close them. So... But I don't feel anything from you. What? Why? Only him. A little bit of her... It was a woman, right?"

"Yes."

A 300-angstrom GE nanomatic spinnaker stood in a niche behind a semi-transparent monocurtain in the reception room. As a universal diagnostician, it was probably the most frequently used device in the entire Mother Teresa clinic. It looked like a last refrigerator with a single snake arm attached to the side.

Hunt switched off the Mood Editor and watched as AGENT3 placed the Marin-ean monstrosity on a cart in front of the spinnaker. The doctor glanced at the gun-toting, immobile-faced ragtag men blocking his path and got to work. He grabbed the spinnaker's matte silver arm, applied its injecting tip to the groaning horror-organism on the cart, and mumbled something in Latin.

The first diagnostic results began to appear on the LED-lit wall. The doctor put down the machine's snake arm, patted his pockets, took out a cigarette, and lit one. "Nicotine junkie."

"So?" Hunt asked.

The doctor shuddered, looked up (Hunt had drifted to AGENT3 in the meantime).

"Your acquaintance?" he asked. "Please wait a moment. We are not doing this invasively."

At the same time...

From the threshold of the corridor, Nicholas looked around the reception room with an old Remington leaning against his shoulder. A frightened orderly sat in the corner on an upturned bucket and only blinked. Here and there, streaks of blood marked the blindingly white floor. Under the farthest station lay a large bundle of dirty clothes. One of the anesthesiometers had fresh bullet scars on its black monoplastic casing. The door was covered with graffiti of the Celadon Prince.

“It’s hanging,” the doctor stated, glancing through the smoke at the wide LED. “Contradictory results.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, theoretically it could indicate the presence in the body of...”

“Yes, she’s infected with military bionano, she’s been reconfiguring for almost a day. Tell me how to stop it. Reverse it.”

(The taste of rust flakes chewed between baby teeth. Licks the ceiling of the bus. Shoes too small.)

The pheno-european doctor laughed hoarsely. He pointed his cigarette at the SWAT officer’s ergocarbine.

“If I don’t lie satisfactorily, he’ll shoot me?”

Hunt fired up the behavioral polygraph. A judge entered the alcove, lifted the scale.

“Let’s say I believe in your Hippocratic oath. What’s your name?”

“Roacher.” A snake lighter than a flower.

“Help her, Dr. Roacher.”

The doctor glanced at the screen, at Marina, at the LEDs again.

“I’ve got good Kevorkians,” he said.

Hunt smashed his head, hitting it against the edge of the spinnaker.

The medic screamed at the top of his lungs. He quickly fell silent, looking into the transcendental depths of the Remington barrel (the Devil never sleeps).

Hunt lifted Roacher, supported him by the arm, the doctor swayed on his feet. The hand in which he had previously held a cigarette was now feeling his smashed temple, from where bright blood was flowing.

“I knew it would end like this,” he mumbled “Sons of bitches. Well, come on. Why not.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Who the hell are you?”

Hunt shrugged his powerful shoulders, while...

“Please take the handheld diagnostician and come with me,” Hunt said, handing the ergocarbine to the betters.

“Shoot me here,” Roacher growled. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He polarized the light, looked at himself in the wall. He took a container from his coat pocket and sprayed a thick dressing on the wound. He wiped the blood with his sleeve. All the time he was making wild grimaces of anger and despair at himself.

AGENT3 took Marina back into his arms. Roacher followed them with his gaze to the graffitied door.

“She’ll die anyway, she’ll eat herself from her energy starvation” he said, when he was certain that the giant pheno-asian wouldn’t hear him. The judge didn’t hesitate, Roacher must have believed that at least.

“Take the diagnostician and come with me, doctor. It’s not far. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hit you. Nothing will happen to you.”

It began to dawn on Dr. Roacher. Nicholas recognized the moment of change, he saw the doctor’s pupils dilate.

From then on, he couldn’t look at them openly —only sidelong glances, sudden squints and frowns. His hands shook as he took the diagnostic kit in its leather case out of the cabinet. When they passed other AGENTS on the way, he instinctively turned sideways to them, as if cowering from the evil eye. Once he must have run into some monad, because he grabbed his hip and, limping, cursed in a language that the Devil identified as one of the Chinese dialects —until Hunt dragged him outside the clinic.

Here, in the realm of night, the doctor lost even more of his self-confidence. The further they went from the clinic lights, the less of the arrogant doctor in Roacher, more of an ordinary, embattled sculpted in the wild districts, and on top of that without a juridical summoner at hand. He walked faster and

faster, as if fleeing from Hunt, although both he (i.e. AGENT1) and the silver-haired mulatto were almost on his heels, still maintaining the same distance. The quadruple sound of energetic footsteps echoed off the black surface of the empty pitch.

They entered the wreck of the bus. Hunt could hear the shallow, irregular breathing of the doctor pushed into the darkness. Roacher, stooped, toddled forward (they followed him), with one extended leg examining the junkyard in front of him, step by step, uncertainly, clumsily. Until something moved in the deepest blackness, wet sheets of darkness unwound and the eerily pale face of a bald man emerged from them, with lowered eyelids, half-open mouth. A patch of white flashed as he reached toward the doctor with a hand covered in a tight glove, from which blood was dripping.

The poor doctor screamed at the top of his voice and ran away. But immediately he tripped, fell, and on top of that ran into AGENT17.

He screamed again. The echo rang inside the scrapyard.

Hunt exhaled and spat out MoP, Metallica fell silent (*Blinded by me, you can't see a thing, Just call my name 'cause I'll hear you scream, Master...*).

"My hand, doctor."

He tried to get up on his shaking legs, but he wasn't very successful.

Until Nicholas himself began to be afraid (great fear of the monster of the night): The Fungus didn't excrete such a strong source in the immediate vicinity.

"Calm down, for God's sake!"

The Devil stood in the shadows, outlined in light himself, and nodded gloomily.

"You'll lose this hand, sir."

Five minutes later, the shaken doctor Roacher read from the diagnostician in an equally trembling voice:

"You should have it amputated as soon as possible, sir."

"Impossible, gangrene couldn't have developed that quickly!"

“Then something helped it. Those were gunshots. I know about that, that’s what I mainly do. I’ve seen more strangely stuffed bullets. Really... You should have it amputated as soon as possible. Sir.”

Hunt looked away.

“Yes,” the judge confirmed when asked.

ROACHER maintained that such an operation could not be performed here, Hunt had to go to Mother Teresa – but he objected very briefly when Nicholas told him no and ordered everything necessary to be brought to the wrecked bus. The question of the required antiseptics arose. The Automatic Surgeon was brought in. It was a surprisingly light box the size of a microwave. Unwrapping the LEDpad, Hunt inserted his right hand into it. When he withdrew it, it was a foot shorter, and the box much heavier. So now I am a one-armed bandit, Nicholas thought, looking at the stump with a strange calmness, suddenly intoxicated by the crisp night air. One-armed – there was something about that in some mythology.

Of course, he refused any anaesthesia or anesthetic during the procedure. Roacher accepted this objection in silence. During the programming of the Surgeon and afterwards, when the operation was underway, Hunt tried to smooth his thoughts, to calm the doctor – drawing him into conversation.

“What are you doing here, doctor?”

“Medicine.”

“Idealist?”

“Unfortunately.”

“A trevelyanist?”

“No.”

“Oh, to atone for the sins of our ancestors? Insured for sure.”

“I wouldn’t have anything to look for here if I called the jurdas even once.”

“So you’re Celedon’s liegeman. You and who else?”

“They left when it broke out, before the streets were even blocked.”

“The Plague.”

“That’s what they say.”

“What do you think about it?”

“I don’t know. Contradictory recommendations are coming in. Under the microscope, it looks like an artificially optimized RNAditor, besides, the very speed of the Plague’s spread, the multitude of indirect sources, indicates deliberate action. On the other hand —and that doesn’t make much sense, because, as far as we know, the damn thing has spread all over the world... It doesn’t hurt you, does it? I would feel it. That’s what I thought. Toulouse? I saw the specs.”

“What, you don’t, doctor? Does it help.”

”Really? I would remember if they mentioned anything... If I may ask... that edited woman —is that why?”

“Toulouse? No.”

“Oh.”

“She’ll die.”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re lying.”

“She’ll die, yes. You can’t survive something like that.”

Doctor Roacher examined and dressed Nicholas’s twice-shot shoulder, after which AGENT1 took the doctor back to the clinic.

You can suppress the effects of post-operative shock, but no neurotricks can fool the body, Hunt had to rest now. He slept in the dark, pleasantly cool interior of the burnt-out bus for the rest of the night, the day, and part of the evening. The Devil watched over the peace of his sleep. After waking up, Nicholas saw a precisely composed altar of food before him collected in the meantime by

obedient AGENTS: hermetically sealed fruit, cans and bottles of drinks, cans and baked goods with ready meals, branded sandwiches.

Biting into a lemon-flavored apple, he walked out in front of the wreck. He did not see his army, but when he asked Lucifer, he showed him its deployment. As it turned out, it had grown to one hundred and twelve AGENTS, more than half of whom had firearms. The zone extended for three blocks in each direction. The AGENTS were collecting food not only for him, they also had to eat, the manager took care of them.

Marina was still alive. He did not touch MoP, he did not want to know what she looked like now. AGENT3 watched over her in a demolished store warehouse across the street, plugging nutritional doses stolen from street vending machines into her veins. These so-called "blood donations" (although there was no blood in them at all) became very popular among drug addicts. Most of the new generation chemical stimulants allowed sessions lasting even several days, and fans of the sensations they provided protected themselves from dehydration and weakening of the body in this way. Recently, OVR long-distance runners did the same. As the Devil claimed, Marina had used four full blood donations so far.

It is true that Hunt had indeed given Lucifer an order to keep her alive at all costs, after all, he had somehow consciously-unconsciously expected that the problem would have resolved itself by now; but she was still alive and now he was looking for a way to ground his anger.

He sent AGENT1 to Marina, let the Corpse-Thief pervert her non-invasively, just an elegant kiss on the hand (if she still had hands).

While waiting for the connection to be established, Nicholas went back to the LEDpad, wrapped it back around the stump and checked his account.

Julius Qurant replied at 2:44 p.m.: YES. PARK GATE.

Hunt wondered if he knew about Colleen. At least he had to guess. No, no—he knew for sure: he asked. If he had any hope, he would be asking about his wife now without restraint. So he knew about Vittorio's death. So why should he keep his end of the bargain? Nicholas wouldn't keep it. So maybe it wasn't Qurant who had replied...?

OK. LET'S GO. I'LL GIVE YOU THE TIME.

Then Hunt configured macros for all the programs he used and the MUI options and attached them to the gestures of his right hand. The limb had been removed, but the neural pathways remained. To reduce disorientation, he restored its all-sensory construct in OVR. He had both hands again: one for the world of matter, one for the world of relationships.

He snapped his fingers —his right hand —and Marina entered the wreck, regressed in time by half a year, white-haired again, sculpted with insane symmetry down to the last facial feature, a Sevrian model of beauty, in this suit of black polysilk, a fabric with the thickness and texture of a spring shadow.

"That's a good way indeed," she said, picking up a can of Float from the altar and opening it (drinking only while standing up!).

"What exactly?"

"OVR. Protects against December." She drank and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand; she could make similar gestures in a truly royal style. If I were Schatz, I'd say it's the second stage. Or maybe the third. Constant safe distance and mediated contacts. In simple extrapolation, that's how I'd predict the direction of civilization's development. Remember those horrors: we're all in OVR, and above it another OVR, and another one... Classic. Dream dream dream, Berkeley giggling from the sky. But now it seems necessary."

Hunt reflexively scratched his bald head with the wrong hand.

"Since the mind is a universal constant... Same for Nefeleans as for us..."

"Hmm?"

"I don't know, never mind, it slipped my mind," he waved broadly to make light of it.

Nibbling on a sandwich with unidentified meat (it's getting harder and harder to tell the origin of specific animal genes by taste), he went out onto the pitch and looked back toward the city center. From this distance, you can no longer see individual buildings, their lights —only the shape of the massif and the colors of the airship school.

Hunt made a neat circle with his right thumb and index finger, and the vision booster went into action. Zoom. Smoke over Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten

Island. Swarms of CAVs and UCAVs. He flicked his hand.

He went to CNN live on the LEDpad. Riots on a large scale. Discipline in the National Guard. The governor is in a quandary. People are fleeing to suburban residential areas on foot and on bikes, probably in large numbers now.

Maybe that's for the best, he thought. It's always easier with electricity.

Before they set off again, Marina managed to ask him a question.

"Well," he replied, remembering that she remembered his hands around her neck, "your chances are slim. Maybe if we make it to Four-Leaf... they definitely have a medic's branch there. I'll try to get there tonight."

"I'd be grateful."

He bowed silently.

It's getting in the blood, though. I mean: NEti. Only in form freedom! Even the Devil knew tact and ostentatiously stared at the Moon and the advertisements.

The AGENTS had not let anyone out of Mother Teresa all day and now, as they were leaving, Hunt saw Dr. Roacher standing idly in the wide open doorway, the educational holographs flickering chaotically above him, full of moths lured to the light. Besides, more than one Roacher was watching, thousands of people lived here.

Nicholas had several hundred eyes and saw proportionally more. But above all: things that he would normally perceive as individual phenomena, he now saw within the framework of a huge panorama. The world perceived was a world of large numbers, and it seemed to him that he understood what Schatz had meant, or at least —he understood the mechanisms of his reasoning. The element, yes, still the same uncontrollable element, the idea of which had haunted Hunt since childhood —but if you look closely, you can recognize currents, streams, weaker and stronger currents. Having recognized them —determine the direction and predict the future.

They got rid of fingers, that was obvious. They bit them off, cut them off, chopped them off, burned them. He saw it even in non-animals —how they bent their fingers inwards, pressed their thumbs, forgot to use them and in the most

ordinary situations groped instead with their intangible fists.

When they wanted to look to the side, they did not turn their heads, but turned in that direction with their whole bodies. It was as if someone had shackled them in orthopedic collars.

When they drank, they did so in single sips, each time withdrawing their lips and carefully, with effort, swallowing the liquid. Then they opened their mouths wide for a deeper breath.

They had difficulty going down the stairs, the steeper the steps. They stumbled, stiffened their straight legs. Something with their knees. I think.

These were not animalized at all: just random savages, poor unsculpted. Here, after all —he had to repeat this to himself over and over —life still went on. Neither in the inner zone of luxury of NYC, nor in the outer circle of the "second third-quarters" would he see all this as clearly as here, where, out of NEti, it was played out openly, on the streets, in full view of the city. He regretted that he could not eavesdrop on their conversations. Judging only by his own, moldy self, he was unable to determine the linguistic deviations. But they —a group with strong social ties —certainly reinforced all semantic currents. In general: interactions intensify resonance. You can see it in these savages.

What about the undoubted, one hundred percent beasts of prey...! The Devil had a special eye on them, because according to Nicholas's order, all those encountered were to go to the Corpse-Thief. The acquired AGENTS very rarely presented even a decent physical condition. There were quite a few who could barely stand on their feet and, if it were not for the nano shot by the Corpse-Thief, if it were not for the pressure of the nano networks —they would not have taken a single step further. Indeed, some looked like the living dead, extras from an amateur non-digital horror film. The immersion in thought had definitely not done them any good. Hunt, remembering Ronald's analogies, tried to deduce the content of the initiating psychomemes from the effects of the distorted procedures. Of course, at most we could speak of a resultant, of some general tendencies. Hints as to the vectors of form...

Nefele.

”IT must be more than luck” Marina pointed out.
 ”Hmm?”

”We slaughtered counterterrorism units. Two officers on duty fell in front of the police car cameras. We’ve occupied the clinic for a dozen or so hours, completely disconnecting it from the network, which is equivalent to an alarm. They have all our data. We are foreign intelligence agents. From orbit, they have us in the palm of their hands: no need for municipal networks, the police could have rotated their satellites. What? Do I see assault CAVs here?”

”How do you know about those policemen?”

”The Devil told me.”

It was a side effect of subordinating the Corpse-Thief to Toulouse and integrating the MUI. The greater the convergence of the OVR interlocutors, the lower the risk of distortions; and somehow Vassone’s sensorium had to be filled. True, theoretically she should already have her own implant —but even that wouldn’t help, because Hunt’s implant was still blocked, and physically Marina was out of Nicholas’s sight. She was walking next to him on the street, reacting appropriately to him and her surroundings, only because the Devil was sending her sensual readings of Hunt and the closest AGENTS in the format of CIOTS.

Nicholas pointed behind him, toward the center.

”They have enough on their hands.”

”That too,” she admitted. ”But they should have taken us out a long time ago.”

He glanced at her suspiciously. She was playing with her juridictor’s pendant.

”What are you suggesting?”

”That mentality must be favoring us.”

”Have mercy, Marina...!”

”I’m speaking figuratively!” she became offended. ”You’ve read too much Schatz.”

"Prose?"

She shrugged.

"The trend has slipped. Botched. Either natural resistance, bad feedback. Or someone has deliberately neutralized it. Although I don't believe in miracles."

"Oh? So you've already abandoned your conspiracy theories?"

"The sudden loss of the conspirators resolve is even harder to explain.

Hunt unrolled the LEDpad and entered the public newsfeed. "Nicholas Hunt" AND/OR "Marina Vassone" in the dataflow. On the intensity-time graph covering the last week, it looked almost like a classic population bell curve. The trend reached its peak two days after their escape from the mafia surgeons' den. The UCAV attack, the SWAT chase—they were already on a downward curve. Of course, such strong trends never completely dissolve in just a few days, it was still far from the zero axis. Nevertheless, there's no hiding the fact that it was dying out.

"Hmm, you can't be unlucky all the time," Nicholas summed up.

"Do we believe in chance? Since when?"

"You have to believe in something."

"Look," she tapped her fingernail on the stiffened LEDscreen, "how similar the left and right slopes are to each other. The excitation was not accidental, you must admit."

"December accelerated everything after that. Otherwise it would have fallen much more gently."

"Probably. But don't those who set it up know about it? Don't they look at the charts?"

There was something to it. But even if someone had actually induced a countertrend there—Hunt had no way of checking it or, much less, contacting unexpected allies. Maybe it was Tito, persuaded by Imelda? No, Gaspar wouldn't have stuck his neck out.

The sun set and Hunt felt more confident. He ordered Lucifer to check all

means of transport he encountered, especially older, non-computerised vehicles —here, the chances of finding them were the greatest in districts as if taken straight from the 20th century. Tossing a paper MoP in his right hand, with Metallica in the background, Nicholas, himself invisible, slipped through the deepest shadows of the slums, two blocks in one step, in one exhale. The zone originally stretched for several hundred metres, but the more densely inhabited the area they entered, the tighter the cordon Hunt had to surround himself with. Since time was the priority, the Devil could no longer choose his route so freely. AGENTS destroyed cameras, drove away savages —but it was not enough. From balconies, windows, roofs, from the depths of the blocks —ugly unsculpted stared at the march of this army. The larger the groups they gathered in, the greater the probability that a single thought would prevail over them, that the series of feedback loops of their minds with thought would generate a monad, or at least some short-lived turbulence that would then carry them away and, suddenly transformed into a Crowd, push them to some mad deeds, illogical, pointless, suicidal. Better to induce fear. So Nicholas ruffled his feathers, bared his fangs, presented his weapons —or rather, his puppets presented them. AGENTS of the outer circle, those with the most impressive postures, the most hideous physiognomies, ostentatiously cocked their pistols, raised their rifles to their shoulders, cast gloomy glances at the onlookers. The gossip would travel like lightning, now, near December, probably faster than a telephone call. After all, many had tried to get to the Skye clinic during the day, and the Devil had to drive them away. When they left, the first thing Dr. Roacher did (Hunt would bet) was to send a man to the Celedon Prince. The Prince would not sit idly by, too many people would see his humiliation here: city savages and wilderness savages are subject to the same laws of tribal psychology. Maybe these are his people, the cheap ones by the tobacconist, the ones in the driveway, the ones on the terrace. There are too many of them, too many. Things are getting hot, the thoughts are thickening, Fungus is no longer enough. On the Devil's compiled map, there is no monad here, but Hunt can clearly feel the rage, the undirected anger, the desire for revenge growing inside him with every step. He must retreat, find another way.

“What is it?” Marina frowned.

“Not this way,” Nicholas gasped, furious. “Don’t you feel it? He could see the empty face of a giant pheno-asian above the heads of the nearest AGENTS.”

“No,” she replied.

“Because I... Damn it.”

He quickened his pace. The evenly trimmed lawn was like a soft Persian carpet under his little feet. Mom was calling from the porch, but he had almost caught Nasty, she was barking at him now from under the tree, he'd grab her by the collar and...

“I don't understand any of this!” He shook his head.

“From what?”

“Well, one of two places: either here or there!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Full OVR is internally unverifiable, right?” He raised a finger.

“That's true.”

“Well, it's not true! No orthovirtualizations protect you from psychomeme infections! You'd need some kind of Super-Fungus, and even that probably wouldn't be able to handle it. They could falsify your entire sensorium, all your senses —and you'd still be osmotically, through your mind, receiving echoes of the real world. You won't interfere with the minds of VR characters, because they don't have minds. So if the shades of thought now match the perceived surroundings —that means that this is the real surroundings.”

“Did you have any doubts about that?”

“I still do!” He told her about Sneaky Fucker, about the snake that bit into his chest and implant, about the subtle smell of incense that someone here could still smell, someone very close, and about the inexorable logic of improbabilities.

Marina stopped. They had now entered the passage of a demolished shopping center, densely and low-rise built according to last century architecture. The gouged shop windows gaped with condensed darkness, which spilled out in damp puddles of shadow; they waded through it. The remains of looted goods were strewn across the pavement. Marina bypassed them with a dancing grace, probably partly added by MUI. Black polysilk merged her with the night. Face, cleavage, hands, feet —apart from that one shadow. She looked at Hunt, tilting her head to her shoulder (that's Melton-Kinsler), with clear, calm eyes,

unblinking (that's Vassone).

"You've gotten yourself into a loop," she concluded. "You've lost your way in OVR. You're insane, Nicholas."

It was as if she was pleased with that.

"I know," he growled. "I helped those from Justice establish the interpretation myself."

"So you thought that all this was the OVR of that sneaker..." She reached out, touched him with a cold hand. "From the very beginning..."

He pushed her away.

"No! Whatever I did, I did for real!"

She snorted.

"Now I don't understand. After all, I..." He drew four straight lines in the air, the index finger of his right hand leaving burning scratches behind it, space crackled slightly, torn. He signed the horizontal columns: 'OVR-world' and 'RL-world'; the vertical ones: 'OVR-me' and 'RL-me'.

"Let's call it Hunt's Wager," he said. "We'll go through the entire matrix in order. If I'm in OVR and I behave as if I were in OVR —everything is fine. Similarly in the case of real life. But now incompatible cases. I'm in OVR and I behave as if it were reality. Am I losing something? Am I exposing myself? No, that's okay too. But if it's not OVR and I'm playing Nintendo... Who am I then? A fucking Raskolnikov, a conscienceless sociopath, a criminal megalomaniac. Calculus of minimizing the costs of error: when in doubt, always assume that this is reality; and even when you have no doubts."

You assumed so."

"Exactly. The thing is that these two mutually exclusive alternatives —they can't both be true at once! If I'm in Hedge's house —how did I get infected with December? why did I feel what I felt all the time? I still do. If I'm standing here with you in the middle of a herd of these zombies —why is someone still breathing in the smoke of his incense? Why can't I connect with anyone through the implant?"

"I told you: Toulouse 10 is partly Langolian's patent and..."

"I don't believe it!" he protested vigorously. "It would never pass inspection with such an error!"

Marina shrugged.

"This is not an Agatha Christie detective story," she snorted "this is not a film, a symmetrical allegory enclosed in a novel. This is life, this is really happening. You die without knowing the final explanations, you die in even greater ignorance, because over the years the questions have only grown. There is no one universal pattern. Everyone explains things in their own way. Don't you know? Everyone perceives different dependencies, constructs a different model."

"But what the fuck kind of model can I construct for myself, since I'm getting contradictory data?! Life is not quantum physics!"

"True, even more complicated and there's even less to understand." She shook her head. She was now looking at him with narrowed eyes, without a shadow of sympathy. "I thought so... But no, you're making yourself out to be a victim again. Spare me that, Nicholas, okay? In the most optimistic scenario, I'll survive as some kind of freak; forgive me for not crying bitter tears over you here."

"You're an iron bitch, aren't you" he drawled.

"A little sense, Nicholas, a little style."

"Sir," said the Devil, "the embassy has arrived."

"What?"

"They are waiting at the Shell. Do you want to see?" A flat plane appeared. Lucifer extended his claws, dug them deep into the cloud of light in front of him and tore the space in two. Hunt peered into the widening crack. The Devil must have understood Nicholas's command differently, because the image was not in 2D after all.

A disused old gas station, a block or two from here (the AGENTS did not come too close, but since it was an open intersection, the scan was from a wide angle and the holo looked realistic to the point of being tangible). There were

six of them sitting there, all unsculpted, all with the tattoos of the Celadon Prince. They were pointing something out in front of Nicholas, probably the less well-hidden AGENTS.

“They most likely do not have firearms on them,” said the Devil.

“They are waiting.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can’t you get past them?”

“Of course you can. The question is delay, and if they prove determined enough...”

“Well, yes.”

Marina, standing on tiptoe, peered into the gap over Hunt’s shoulder.

“You have to negotiate passage.”

“You know best that we don’t have time.”

“You’re leading foreign troops through his territory.”

True.

So it came to Nicholas Hunt’s turn as a sovereign ruler. Farce, he thought, as he walked through an arcade inflated with chiaroscuro.

Then he looked at the reflection in the glass of one of the surviving shop windows. Hunt was almost invisible beyond the crowd of empty-eyed zombies. A patch of black, a face as pale as paper, but the paper was also very crumpled. He smiled to himself, and, indeed, it was the smile of a vampire. The Devil on the left (in the fire), Marina on the right (in the shadow), a ghostly retinue all around. It was as if they were stepping in the same rhythm. Higher up, still in that reflection (one image), the stormy darkness of the City swarmed: the tarry smoke of invisible fires, thrusting, black fist after fist, into the fields of sky-high advertisements. So there was the bright purple of filtered lights, and there was hellish smog in multiple storm fronts. Military locusts swarmed the sky in black swirls. Winged demons were falling from the abyss and racing in crazy slaloms between the airships. One of the skyhouses was on fire. As it burned, it flew

apart and fell, torch by torch, into the City's financial center. Smaller demons were flying directly above the passage. Scaled fiends darted under the zombies' feet. Hunt curled the fingers of his severed hand and the army swung, circling the Shell station and the Prince's envoys; which Hunt knew, though he wasn't looking.

The King of Necropolis.

In MUI and RL.

THERE are etiquettes and etiquettes; they didn't know NEti here, but they had their own rituals. The only good thing he could say about them was that they were shorter. The negotiations took less than fifteen minutes. As a result, the intimidated Celadon envoys agreed to allow Hunt's army to transit through the Prince's territory, without even demanding a payment in drugs (which were the cash of this world). Nicholas, however, was not satisfied, especially after such a turn of events; the closer he got to Four-Leaf, the more hopeless it all seemed to him.

Of course, he didn't risk his own body, exposing it to the negotiations: he negotiated through AGENT124, one of the best-preserved animals, a pheno-black in a natural suit, in burgundy tabi —he even had a juridictor's earring. The Shell station was surrounded by fifty more AGENTS. The Devil imposed a strict script of psychological domination behavior on them, almost all of them were armed, none of them smiled, many of them looked like victims of severe beatings... The six princes managed to cultivate their own monad of fear during that fifteen minutes, they almost bowed before the pheno-black. Maintained by Metallica on the edge of adrenaline euphoria, Nicholas looked at them from above, from under half-dropped eyelids, and drawled words through his teeth.

"Yes. I agree."

They didn't want anything from him —they forced gifts on them.

Then they asked where he was going.

"To the enclaves."

They understood that. Doctor Roacher must have finally identified Hunt

and informed the Prince who exactly had visited his district. He could even recognize Marina. Their likenesses in the TV wanted posters had been recently updated. The envoys didn't say a word about it, and the Devil/psychologist gave an almost one hundred percent guarantee that no one from the Prince's envoy would report Hunt: there are etiquettes and etiquettes.

"To the enclaves. That is, through the Tombs."

Lucifer unfolded a 2D map, with marked material and immaterial obstacles and the route of the march.

"Through the Tombs," admitted Hunt "or the bridge."

"There's a blockade on the bridge; not without a fight."

Lucifer immediately corrected the map.

"So through the Tombs."

"But there..." began a pimply gangster in a red bandana.

"Right?"

"Josè wants to say that the Tombs are haunted." The head of the delegation spat over his shoulder and crossed himself (but how: with his fingers bent inwards). "We have blood with the Roosters, and if someone tried to cross, they immediately go crazy, cut themselves and chirped from the first machine. No one comes back. Or a monkey comes back."

"No. It'll be three days now."

"Even the cops don't go in."

"Those who live there?" Hunt asked.

"You mean, in the Tombs? All are monkeys. Or worse." Hunt raised an eyebrow.

"I can't believe it," Josè mumbled.

"Poumpree, a broken dickhead, wanted to ride his Harley."

"What?"

"It fucked him up completely. He's still riding in there somewhere."

"A Harley-riding ghost."

"Fucking..."

"...monkey."

None of them had Toulouse after all. Having been so close to each other for so long, they were already speaking with one voice.

"A mighty plant monad, sir," said the Devil. "I don't think I can protect you, not during such a long passage."

"An alternative route?"

"Look."

"Ugh. Far. How much time are we losing?"

"Three to five hours. We have to go back, so using cars is even more out of the question."

"We won't make it before dawn."

"No, sir."

"Any ideas?"

"I mentioned the possibility of constructing and synthesizing such a..."

"Christ, you're starting this nonsense again!"

"Wait until the trend dies out," suggested the Devil in turn. "How long? Time, contrary to appearances, is against us. Another random police patrol, some stray guards, an overlooked camera, pissed off jurdas, a curious UCAV of the TV network... Enough."

"You should make a deal with the Prince, sir. The authorities will not risk a regular assault, not now, when only thanks to the Plague, the economic crisis, and general chaos that September did not provoke a civil war."

"Did it leak?"

"Yes, sir. It is on the services, for now as an unconfirmed rumor. You saw it, but you clearly did not pay attention."

"Okay, but that is not the solution. Only the enclave gives me some kind of guarantee of safety. Here I would not be sure about tomorrow. Are you able to predict how the situation will develop? Besides —I remind you, because you like to forget about it —the priority is to keep Dr. Vassone alive."

"I thought so, sir."

"Are you playing games again?" Hunt got angry. He didn't know to what extent it was just his impression, but he noticed a certain pattern in the behavior of the implant manager: his attempts at minor disobedience occurred every time Nicholas showed some weakness toward the Devil, when he revealed himself. Of course, he should have realized: there is no talk of rigid algorithms here, these programs learn, improve themselves, evolve."

"I beg your pardon."

"You're welcome. If we were to believe your assessments from the beginning, Vassone should have been dead long ago."

"Sir, I'm not at all certain that this is not the case."

"What?"

"I suppose that in a clinical sense, she may already be dead. Her brain..."

"I just spoke to her!"

"I'm not sure about that either. The connection is possible thanks to the Corpse-Thief's network, but Vassone also has a second nano, a military version for Shadows. It is highly unlikely that she has not established her own logical structure by now. On the other hand, I have been constantly monitoring her physical condition through AGENT3 and I can confirm that all of these parameters, which are lethal to the human organism, are maintained, and that for almost a day Dr. Vassone has not made a single intentional movement outside of her autonomic nervous system. Should I..."

"No!"

"I apologize, sir. I just wanted to show you how much her condition..."

"I don't want to see anything, how many times do I have to repeat it?"

"Of course."

"Tell me clearly what you mean."

"I simply have doubts. It is my duty to warn you, sir. It seems to me that the military bionano computing modules currently have a greater share of the reactions transmitted from her by the Corpse-Thief."

"Do you think so?"

"I can provide estimates of probabilities."

"Thanks a lot," Nicholas snorted. "As usual, you have made the situation much clearer."

"I'm trying, sir."

Hunt made the sign of the cross with his right hand, and Lucifer curled up in a cloud of sulfur.

The Prince's envoys looked at Nicholas with visible nervousness, two of them ostentatiously playing with knives. Hunt realized that in the meantime, in some borrowed reflex, he had reached for his juridical earring —which caused understandable anxiety among the savages. Insured persons were always in a privileged position compared to the uninsured, and not only because the latter were unable, within the framework of the financially inefficient justice system, to enforce punishment/compensation for most of the wrongs done to them. Also in the case of serious crimes still prosecuted *ex officio* (if, for example, Hunt killed a native on the spot), good legal insurance gave a significant chance of avoiding punishment or getting away with only a symbolic one. Not always, of course. Under unfavorable trends, he could even count life imprisonment. Nevertheless, it remained a popular and memetically consistent theme of films, series and games, and these savages here had a right to be afraid when a richly dressed sculpted surrounded by his armed retinue watched them like that, deep in thought stroking the symbol of his juridical corporation.

He spat out MoP, Metallica fell silent. Marina stood at the exit of the passage, leaning against a colorful drug machine, looking at the sky. He also instinctively raised his head. The moon was hiding behind the Red Cross logo. The

wind was blowing the smoke toward the Atlantic and through the thinned-out holoplasts one could see the stars. With some surprise, he noticed that he could easily recognize and name individual constellations, more: individual stars. His eyes turned to the expected points of the planets' positions: Jupiter here, Mars there. Some astronomy course... No, he had never attended. So what? Maybe a raise from Toulouse swaps? But it doesn't work that way.

"So what are these gods like?"

She smiled.

"There's a fourth: Beauty."

She remembers. The Devil was wrong: it's not a machine answering. How could it know the contents of Marina's brain?

Well, there must be ways...

Stop! Truth or deception?

It's very simple. After all, I can only honestly assume one thing: reality.

(The hot breath of the hookah fills the lungs. The pressure of the fez on the temples.)

He even reached for the mouthpiece of the pipe, with his right hand, the magic one; and he could almost feel its shape under his fingers. He had long fingernails, he ran them over the wood...

"Damn it!"

Now he was furious enough to order his army to break through this bridge blockade no matter the cost. What the hell, a hundred less beasts, a hundred more beasts...!

AGENT1 left to accept the Prince's gifts. That was Celadon's only condition: Hunt had to take over all local game reserves and take them outside his domain. They knew he could do it: the Devil had taken possession of dozens of bodies during that day, while Hunt slept off the amputation. So they knew, he could see it in their eyes. Was that why they were afraid, was that why they lied? Probably. So who were they bowing to? The corpses.

Let them go, let them die!

The wind brought the roar of the helicopter blades. Hunt jumped back into the deeper shadow. Without Baryshnikov's support, he stumbled and fell, painfully breaking his hip. He clenched his teeth, cursing in his mind with impotent anger. Several AGENTS ran up to help him, but he chased them away. He blocked the pain, stood up on his own. Despite all these logical arguments, spectacular matrices, calculations of probabilities —the snake of doubt still bit him from the inside, slowly, with infinite patience. Because why push like that, wouldn't it be wiser to wait calmly for an exit from OVR...?

Sharp edges crushed him through the material of his coat. He reached out with his left hand. The Prayer plates. He moved them here from the bag he had given to one of the AGENTS, the plates and the injection capsule. He looked at it on his open palm.

The second, last portion of Efes.

Yes. Yes!

He lifted and pressed the capsule to his neck.

This time he was prepared. Nevertheless, it took him a good few minutes to recall everything in the necessary detail, in a logical sequence. He stood, hunched, and shook his head. Marina started to say something —he brutally turned her off in mid-sentence.

He shouted at the Devil, then unfolded the LEDpad. He remembered using two different browsers: Knight and ProRes. He started with ProRes. Ravenskull 2.0 —he always wrote that, every time it worked. He wrote it now. He launched the browser. The file was found on a part of a certain Hamaba, behind the Vienna star, that was made available to external users. Some Austrian hacker (Night Rider —the catalog was titled: Nachtritter's Resources) had it in his head. Hunt downloaded Ravenskull and checked the hacker's demand catalog. Unfortunately, it didn't have anything that the other guy wanted —these were undoubtedly the hottest tracks at the moment.

An AGENT appeared with the reader Nicholas had ordered.

"I took it from the locals," the Devil informed.

Hunt inserted both disks into the drive one by one and copied Prayer onto the LEDpad. Then he fired up Ravenskull. Ravenskull —Ravenskull calmly began to decompress Prayer.

He wondered briefly whether Hedge really might not have known about him, or whether he had deliberately lied to keep the Prayer to himself. Hmm, after all, I had asked him for his opinion a good few days ago, which in the case of this type of software makes a significant difference. (If it really was a few days, and not just a few hours or... *Apage!*)

There were now two ways to copy the unpacked Prayer to Hunt's Toulouse, whose communication module remained blocked. The first, more obvious: scroll through the entire assembly listing of the program on the LEDscreen in front of Nicholas' eyes. But that would take too much time. Second: use one of the AGENTS and transfer the file from his implant via the Corpse-Thief. There weren't many of the AGENTS with implants, and none with Toulouse (if they had Toulouse, they would have had Fungus, they wouldn't have ended up in a zoo —Hunt really wanted to believe that), but right in the passage he found two with Hamaba.

He did as he remembered. Then he launched Prayer.

The Devil bowed and pulled an ebonite mace from his bosom.

"This is the scepter of fear and love. What do you command, sir?"

"The Tombs."

JUGRIN spoke:

"It has side effects, of course. We haven't fully recognized all of them. Polymemorism, dyschronia..."

"Is it addictive?" someone from the audience asked.

"No. But it accumulates in the body and makes itself felt even long after the nominal duration of action has elapsed. It is sometimes described as short flashes, or even subconscious intuitions, recognized only *post factum*."

"This... polymemorism?"

"Futurmemory *au rebours*. We don't understand that. The past remembered by the Efeser ceases to form a single cause-and-effect sequence."

Jugrin sketched the following diagram on the LEDbunk: a sheaf of lines converging in the middle at one point, and fanning out at both ends in thirty-degree fans. He marked the arrow of time, and signed the point of convergence: NOW.

"Usually, he added, by comparing remembered facts with experienced ones, the Efeser is able to establish the true course of events; but not always."

He zoomed out and moved the drawing to the ceiling.

"There are certain consequences of using futuroscope, which we are only guessing at now. It is known that with the increase of the effective range of the Efes, that is, the product of the nominal power and the user's jugrinine..."

Giggles in the hall.

"Yes, yes, thank you. As I say, with its increase, the resolution of the futur-memory increases, hmm. In everyday language: one can then choose between futures with an increasingly lower probability of coming true. However, critical events, i.e., changes that decide the choice of path, do not have to be connected in an apparently logical way with the desired effects. Our best Efesers are able to change the flight path of birds by controlling their breathing."

Murmur of disbelief.

"Because what exactly is a futuroscope?" Jugrin smiled. "It's a quasi-organic chemical that affects brain function in a way that we don't really understand. We synthesize it in the Hacienda laboratories using the nano method, artificially building it from scratch—but that's not to say that it can't be created in another way, and it doesn't contain any rare elements, eccentric compounds, anything that we wouldn't find in our bodies anyway. Which doesn't mean that we know how to develop a gland that produces it. Is there an appropriate combination of genes? But: it's possible. I would say that it is probable."

Jugrin measured the audience with a long look.

"If it's probable at all," he emphasized, "then there is such an effective range of the futuroscope, beyond which the Efeser is able to realize the future in which

he has that gland. Which allows him to make further continuous changes. He doesn't need any RNAditor: he simply chooses and implements. What's more: it even does things that even the most brilliant RNAditor would not be able to do. It develops an organ in its endocrine system that naturally produces a long-range analogue of the futuroscope. Like serotonin, somatotropin or calcitonin. Or maybe it simply adapts some existing gland, the pituitary gland, the pancreas, who knows, to its production. Do you understand? We are talking about a specific autocatalyzation program of the futuroscope. A single injection of Efes of an appropriately high power is enough: the threshold is crossed and then it starts an avalanche, unstoppable. A self-coupled machine: the greater the range and resolution, the stronger Efes they provide for themselves, the greater the range, *et cetera, ad infinitum*. We cannot even imagine what we will get at the output. This is a gateway to the Ultimate Mystery."

"You are flying away into metaphysics, doctor. Please, come back down to earth, with Tomaszów.

"Well, yes," Jugrin was embarrassed. "Nevertheless, you have to admit that this opens up a field for interesting speculations. Namely, it is possible that in the past, as accidental mutations, individuals appeared within the species *Homo sapiens* that had an incipient form of such a gland, and if, in addition, they were characterized by a relatively high jugrinine...Nostradamus, natural Efesers of the times of the Devil and the aspergillus...Their visions are very dark...Immortality as one of the possibilities. Two steps along this path —and what do they see? Metal birds, Babylon raised to the nth power, iron dragons, visions in the sky, hell or heaven, both."

"Have mercy, doctor..."

Someone else saved Jugrin, changing the subject, an older unsculpted with the ID of a civilian consultant:

"How exactly did you come up with this futuroscope? After all, it was not what you were supposed to be dealing with there, at the Hacienda."

"It is an interesting story, in general. The guy who started experimenting with these compounds claims that he was inspired by a dream."

Laughs.

"Indeed," Jugrin chimed in. "Besides, he explains himself vaguely and doesn't want to, or can't, say what he actually dreamed. On the other hand, I know from my own experience that such wild associations sometimes lead to discoveries..."

THE so-called Tombs, where several thousand "social standard" apartment blocks were built at the end of the aughts for unskilled immigrants, were now the cradle of New York's unsculpted subcultures and were characterized by a non-incubus birth rate in the top ten for the entire country. "Social standard" here meant a level of "luxury" that could be maintained by those whose entire income came from state social assistance. The people living there did not work, would not work, and would father children who (with rare exceptions) would also never take up legal employment. Sculpting and the education necessary to acquire any profession remained completely inaccessible to them. The few physical jobs that did not require similar qualifications were a monopoly of the parallel prison economy, which had millions of workers at its disposal, whom it had to keep busy. Sometimes—for example in the service sector—employing prisoners was out of the question, but this niche was filled with an abundance of unskilled sculpted, (descendants of the former middle class), who at least looked aesthetically pleasing.

A monad currently sat on the Tombs and the animals that lived there.

He saw (*Twisting your mind and smashing your dreams*) where its influence reached: a few dozen meters away, the native children and youth sat down—laughing, drinking and snacking on garbage, they watched the animals like exotic fauna in a zoo. Besides, that's exactly how the zoo animals behaved. Hunt saw (and he saw many) people crawling on their bellies in the middle of the road, people frozen in the strangest poses, in absolute stillness, as if they had been seized, he saw suicides, their corpses (they had tried to fly). He heard (and he heard exactly: he had already entered the Tombs halfway through the Zone) their incoherent speeches, sometimes consisting of some verbal modules, sometimes completely nonsensical syllables, it was not known to whom they were addressed. Many were seriously injured: self-inflicted, but not only. Some of the animals from the Tomb's monad reacted very aggressively, and the AGENTS had to kill two. But if possible, they caught them and handed them over to AGENT1.

However, the AGENTS did not enter the buildings. The army, like a great, slow tidal wave, washed over the colorful city blocks, erected in an eye-straining postmodern manner. Moreover, this architecture itself gave the impression of being distorted by some aberration of thought over the designer's mind.

Prayer was not designed for the purposes for which Hunt now wanted to use it. It was supposed to be only a way to directly induce tastes and control existing ones, a stick in the river of statistics. What had previously been achieved with the help of expensive advertising campaigns, great memetic offensives engaging the services of organizers of all types of cultural life —now could be achieved by simply entering the desired profile into the program. Slowly, statistically, by millions —this is what Prayer was designed for.

The Devil and Marina explained this to Nicholas, the Devil in this case more as a dialoguing program than a manager of the implant.

"It works like this:" he lectured "It enters the node and monitors parallel transmissions, recognizing Toulouses. Then it hooks itself to the CIOT files of pinging implants from the area, falsifying the checksums. A classic Trojan Horse. Then it is already home. At the first direct request from a user of Prayer with the highest operator status, it opens the Fungus of the broken Toulouse for him. From that moment on, Prayer is able to freely modulate the brain emissions induced by Fungus. What do you think, sir, how many of these savages have implants at all?"

"A few for sure, especially after releasing that half-soggy Toulouse. But I prefer to rely on the Corpse-Thief, its network can perform an analogous function, it is the same nano, only it has a different name and configuration."

"You can't know that," Marina objected.

"I know," Hunt assured. "I will start with them. How many AGENTS do we currently have?"

"One thousand four hundred and six, sir."

"That's right. That's enough."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

The real problem was something else, however: how to check if the action was successful and the Tombs are already safe, and Hunt can pass through them without fear of destroying the structure of his mind by thought overload. He will not conclude anything from observing the behavior of the beasts themselves, because they will always transfer every wave of thought into the sphere of bodily reflexes, regardless of the direct pressure of the monad.

He demanded a visualization of the process and the Devil/Prayer gave it to him, using his MUI. The visualization was based on symbols introduced by the Team's programmers. From the heads of the AGENTS pacifying the Tombs burst clouds of uniformly black smoke, real geysers of tar. They quickly developed into wide whirlwinds, a hundred, two hundred meters toward the night sky. Now he saw a representation of the Army's layout in the district above a colorful housing estate, he also saw how many "fourteen hundred and six" really was. Truly, an Army. As far as the eye could see: a black forest. In a few moments, it grew so dark that the buildings lost their last colors and one could speak at most of differences in the intensity of the shadow. The city was covered with smooth velvet. Its surface seemed to wrinkle, undulate, local concavities and convexities wandered across it, from the latter oily streams flowed down, at street level dividing into narrower fingers, each touching the top of the AGENT's head. AGENTS moved, and those delicately trembling snakes of liquid-gas wandered under carpets of darkness. For man quickly succumbed to just such an illusion: that the transmission proceeded from top to bottom, not the other way around as, it was in reality.

Only that, of course, was not reality either, just another model. How much truth there is in the image—that can only be guessed, never certain. To verify the forecast, you simply have to send someone there—someone not yet bestiated.

Marina:

"Bargain for volunteers from the Prince."

"That will take time."

"I know, damn it."

"He probably won't give them anyway."

Devil:

“No need to bargain, you have them right here, sir, at hand.”

“Who?”

“Them. The Savages. They sit and stare. A hundred or more.”

“I’d break the agreement. I’ll have the enemy behind me.”

“You have enemies everywhere, sir.”

“The Celadon Prince...”

“What will he do?”

“He’ll take revenge.”

“He’ll try, yes.”

Hunt (because the futuroscope didn’t remember that anymore):

“Fuck. Do what you have to do.”

It was so dark that he couldn’t see Marina’s face.

All the more reason he didn’t want to watch Lucifer’s actions.

He escaped with his gaze into the dark canyons between the blocks, between the uneven planes of the great machines for life and death. It’s true that the architecture of matter determines the configuration of thought. Regardless of their superficial style, such housing estates encourage the generation of predetermined psychomemes by the residents’ neurosystems: apathy, a sense of smallness, confusion, dependence. Yes: also *feng shui* is just one of the many aspects of psychomemetics. It is not without reason that such importance is attached to the organization of the space of workplaces. But here —why subordinate ergonomics? In the name of what is this space organized? There is no purpose in the existence of these people. To survive from week to week, from month to month; one wakes up and already knows the day, as if he had experienced it all in a night’s sleep. Hunt remembered well the taste of that morning hopelessness. Especially in winter, under a dirty sky, when the landscape is almost deserted... The child falls asleep with his head on the scratched windowsill, although not

asleep at all—but the monotony of the unchanging view, the harmony of these shapes, is the visual equivalent of a quiet lullaby and the mind is unable to resist. If he wasn't an only child, his siblings would probably distract him from the contemplation of depressing views—and so: the affinities of the structures of pessimism developed, the blackness marked out paths... Snow and mud, old excavations, the wind howling across the abandoned construction site, shaking the helplessly sagging arm of the lonely crane; he remembered that even the sun brought despair, its reflections on steel and glass were not joyful.

Lucifer returned, as luminous as usual, in fire, and said:

"The way is clear."

Hunt entered the Tombs.

He snapped the fingers of his right hand and, gently spreading his thumb and forefinger, increased the brightness. The moving shadows transformed into a personal guard of AGENTS, all with their weapons cocked, state-of-the-art models, dug up from somewhere in the dens and pickpocket warehouses outside of NEti—when it comes to that, you can always count on savages, he concluded cynically.

He caught sight of his distorted reflection in the mirrored elevation of one of the blocks.

"What's that?!" he yelled at Lucifer. He grabbed him by the throat and began to choke him. "What the hell is that?!"

"Krtsztrrr!" the Devil screeched. "You've got Fungus too, sir..."

A huge funnel of blackness was growing from Nicholas's naked skull in that reflection.

"Shut it down!"

"Yes, sir."

The tentacle broke away and fled upwards, toward the tangled velvet.

"Christ!" Nicholas fumed. "You can't even trust the manager of your own implant!"

“Calm down,” Marina pressed.

“Calm down!” he snorted. “You’re good, too, fucking good! Who let me into this shit? Why do they have to run away at all? Who stirred up this avalanche?! Maybe me?! You, fuck, you, your fucking gods!” At Lucifer: “What are you staring at?! Ha? What else did you forget to tell me?”

“Sir...”

“Oh, that’s a bloody thing, for example. What are you visualizing here? What are you using to repress the monad? Because it’s probably not the desire for Pepsi-Cola that’s boiling there!”

Marina quickened her pace. With her arms folded across her chest, she shook her head in disgust.

“You really can’t guess, Nicholas,” she snorted, not looking back. “What could he have in his defaults?”

Hunt opened and closed his mouth. You could see the effort he was putting in to hold back the outburst. The skin on his temples tensed dangerously as he moved his jaw. Murder was in his eyes, Lucifer was escaping from his gaze.

But Nicholas said nothing more.

WHEN they emerged from the darkness, leaving the Tombs and the anger-tainted monad behind them, and Hunt’s mental balance returned, as it was, Marina began her attack.

“I’ve thought about it,” she declared. (What? Nicholas frowned.) “This thing with driving away the monad... Prayer was not designed for such purposes and should not be capable of inducing such strong emissions. Not the one I worked on. What you’re playing with here —this is some later version, the official beta. Who sent it to you?”

“Anselm, I told you.”

“I said it was impossible.”

“Indeed, you said many things.”

Coldly: “who had or could have had access to both Prayer, the Efes, and this compressor?”

Hunt unfolded the LEDpad and wrote to Nachtritter, asking for the date of Ravenskull’s appearance. It must have been dawn in Austria —the hacker wasn’t sleeping, probably on drugs and blood donations, and he replied right away.

IT REACHED ME THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY, BUT I KNOW THAT THE CRACK WAS ALREADY GOING AROUND ON SATURDAY.

SO IT WASN’T SHAREWARE?

NOW IT IS :-)

WHO WROTE THIS?

AFAIK MATHEMATISTS FROM ONE OF THE DEPARTMENTS OF THE LEAGUE, MICROSOFT OR ARM, THEY ARE STILL RACING EACH OTHER IN THE PERFORMANCE OF THE COMPRESSION ALGORITHMS TO EXPERIENCE THE CIOTP.

WILL RS BECOME POPULAR?

IMHO NO. IT’S VERY GOOD, BUT ONLY FOR SOME FILE TYPES, AND PEOPLE PREFER COMBINED PROGRAMS.

SO SOMEONE COULD HAVE USED RS WITH THE INTENTION OF MAKE IT HARD TO READ?

I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE ON ABOUT, MAN, BUT IF HE WANTED TO ENCRYPT IT, STUPID PGP WOULD DO IT.

Hunt still didn’t understand. It wasn’t about hiding Prayer, because the mysterious X had scribbled the name on the top of the tiles. It wasn’t about preventing it from being opened, because he had to know that a cracked Ravenskull would eventually start circulating the net. Maybe it really was just about maximally efficient compression...? He didn’t want to waste the third disk... But then why didn’t he archive it in a self-extracting form.

“At the Hacienda...” he hesitated.

“Do you really think Langolian would let Krasnov get his hands on Prayer?” Marina pressed. “How on earth would that happen? Why would they silence me then? Jason? They should have dropped a nuke on the Hacienda instead. It doesn’t make sense. Krasnov lives off the budget, he’s a saver, he would never risk it all —his position, the Hacienda, the subsidies —to play his own game, hiding a bomb like Prayer from us. That would be his first revelation at the conference!”

“Do you have any other candidates?”

“The number of people allowed onto Prayer was very small. Even most of those I worked with directly, consulting on the calibration of the equipment at Labs —even they didn’t know much. I know that Chigieza and the company’s top management knew, but not the supervisory board and other shareholders.”

“Leading lobbyists must have known too, after all it was in sync with political decisions...”

“Not necessarily. I don’t think so. Too many factors: an agreement with other N-industry tycoons to release Toulouse, the failure of the defensive EDC program, December...”

“They could have released December themselves. Who knows if they really didn’t release it, after all it started in Asia.” Hunt pondered. “But you’re right. In such situations, you wait for an opportunity and play for a trend... They had to have a man in the presidential co-lobby, if only so that the White House could nip any potential investigations and counter-trends in the bud; so that they wouldn’t be surprised by a sudden leak. They couldn’t tell Radick, he’s too high up, he has to be loyal to too many people... They had to have someone who knew the real goal and covered up your lies, the ineffective strategy of the Team...”

“Because I know, you dealt with it quite well yourself,” she noted sarcastically.

He waved his hand for her to be quiet, not to cloud his thoughts. He even stopped and closed his eyes. Just so he wouldn’t introduce her to the pool of misleading memes... Because he was already certain that he had this knowledge. On the tip of his tongue, for two associations, one deductive leap...

“Bronstein.”

She snorted.

“Him?”

He grinned like a vampire should.

“Bronstein, Bronstein.”

“I’m listening, Sherlock.”

“Prayer was Langolian’s,” Hunt began to list. “Efes was supervised at the Hacienda with DARPA. Ravenskull studied computer science at one time.”

“Nice. Just tell me: why? Why you?”

Nicholas grimaced, partly to smile, partly to irritation.

“Maybe not just me.”

“What’s more: why didn’t he include any information? Instructions. What did he want from you, what were you supposed to do with it? What was the purpose of using this exotic packer?”

“You can raise this doubt about any suspect.”

“If I may suggest a solution...,” the Devil timidly joined in. “Given the assumption, there are a few possibilities. He sent it to you just to set you up, sir. Either: he didn’t include an explanation, because he intended to explain everything to you personally. Or: he thought he knew what you would do anyway. That you already knew the case and didn’t have to explain anything. Or maybe he simply didn’t have time. I don’t know the circumstances, sir. Ravenskull could have wanted to guarantee himself a period of, um, grace.”

Marina shifted her gaze from Hunt to the Devil and back again.

“So how did it end? Did he hang himself? Did they help him?”

“Who knows?” Nicholas muttered, glaring at Lucifer. “But now it’s starting to look like his death was actually connected to me somehow.”

“Recall the sequence of events, sir.”

Well, the sequence of events went something like this: Hunt figures out Fungus, flies to Washington, finds Bronstein through PEA, drives to the Watergate, where Bronstein is dangling from a chandelier, and two days later Nicholas receives a package containing Prayer, two FS capsules, the string, the cube (I wonder what the date of her test results are), oh, and the glove; the files are dated the afternoon of the previous day. There's not much to be deduced from that.

That's how he remembers it—but what was it really like? He consciously tried to avoid all the "so's," "therefore's," "as a result of which's" in his mind—but the choice and order of the facts dictated the pattern of reasoning. Had he left anything out? Some details that...

I called him from the plane.

I called him and said, "I know everything. They've got it ready. I'm not letting this go."

Exactly.

Bronstein...

"What?" Marina watched Hunt carefully.

"Nothing."

For a moment he was sure that it had leaked through his mind. But she wasn't here, she wasn't even looking with her own eyes, but thanks to the combination of glances of nearby AGENTS.

"I see well, you guessed something, your face fell."

He shrugged. He passed Vassone with a quick step. However, she could always go even faster.

"Bronstein" he growled. "Sure. Satisfied?"

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

"Are you starting again? Did you have a vision? Have you run out of futu-

roscope.”

“Okay, I give up” he spread his hands. “It’s all my fault.”

“What’s the matter, have you entered some monad of infantilism?”

Hunt jumped at Lucifer, snatched the ebonite scepter from him.

Marina watched silently as Nicholas made, one after another, a dozen or so sweeping, evenly measured gestures, pointing his mace toward the sky, at the AGENTS, at himself, and with his right hand, with his fingers intertwined in complicated mudras, drawing short curves, the electric afterimage of which still hung in the air for a few seconds.

He cast spells, that is: he fired macros.

”No monads,” he said, having finished and slipped the scepter into his right pocket. ”We’re going straight to Four-Leaf. Spit on the map and the CDC announcements. Check all the cars along the way. Don’t attach any more game animals.”

It visualized itself somewhat strangely: a gray fog, heavy, stinking, sticky, which, rising from the streets, from between the houses, pouring out of their windows, surrounded Nicholas and all the AGENTS within sight with high eddies. True, within sight, if you subtract OVR, there were only AGENTS. The giant pheno-asian was somewhere in the outer circles of the Zone, hidden by buildings —and fog.

They walked very quickly, it wrapped around their legs, around their heads, a galaxy of dirty steam. The Devil, recognizing the mood of the moment, withdrew into the night: the manager’s script had evolved (who said machines can’t simulate susceptibility to thought?).

Marina was silent, not even looking back at Hunt. She walked calmly next to him, always perfectly keeping pace with him. She waited patiently for the situation to slide into another form of attractor.

”We left a lot of dead bodies behind us.”

”Uh-huh,” she nodded.

”Remorseful?”

"If I survive."

"Remorseful!" he laughed. But he immediately became serious. (Colleen... if they had aimed better...)

"You've been very effusive lately."

"Yeah, yeah, you sons-of-bitches are falling apart."

She put her hand on his shoulder.

"You're probably a good person after all," she said, looking him in the eye.

He looked away. Acid filled his mouth. Kleist was right, it was indecent.

It was like that spider again. He'd deny it —he'd come off as a common cynic. He wouldn't deny it —he'd come off as a conceited hypocrite. She caught him as skillfully as a cat would a sparrow.

"It seems he judged me the same way." He sighed loudly. "Look where it led..."

"Hmm?"

"Do you know why I was sent to DARPA?"

"I've heard all sorts of rumors..."

"Yeah. I don't doubt it." He took a deep breath. "That's when I felt like I was really alive."

"What did you actually paint there?"

"I ordered sympathy for my grandchildren."

"What?"

"You see, I was the second manager of the president's lobby, the investment wing. Generational tax. Retirees. Yes, retirees; old people, over sixty, and relying on budget guarantees, direct and indirect, and beneficiaries of government assistance programs. Do you have any idea how many of them there are in the States today? Even more than the statistics suggest. As an electorate, they count four times over, because eighteen-year-olds and younger are completely out

of the question, and people between twenty and thirty are the most apolitical and inactive stratum. On top of that, these old bastards vote in blocs, very tight-knit, very organized, and yes, the perfect group of voters. They can decide for themselves whether any candidate wins or loses. They have been prevailing for years —except for some lower-level positions in "young" cities. Politicians who threaten their interests are simply not elected. Guess the last time a candidate they did not support got into the White House? I do not mean those they do not sponsor, because every sponsor supports both candidates at the same time; but those who do not promote them in legislation above other electorates. Well, when? A long time ago. Never. Seriously? Everyone is surprised. But you can check for yourself. No party has remained in power for as long as they have. The result? The state budget is doomed to an increasingly monstrous deficit, and the state itself to bankruptcy. The sum of benefits due to retirees clearly exceeds the sum of budget revenues year after year: every working person supports at least one unemployed person. What about the army? What about debt service? What about security and education?" As he counted, anger got the better of him, he spoke faster and faster, and louder, and he paid less and less attention to Marina. "Medicators, juridical corporations and Trevelyanism are short-term solutions. In Europe, they fell into this channel earlier, because their the buffer of pension investment funds and the private enterprise sector is smaller, but in the end we also got it. From an economic point of view the solution is obvious: benefits should be radically cut and legal guarantees of a prosperous old age should be reduced or eliminated, because the state simply cannot afford them, it is impossible to spend more than you have forever, you cannot disprove mathematics. But in a democratic system, it cannot be done: pensioners, focused on this one issue like no other part of the electorate and numerically predominant, will never vote for something like that. The generational tax is growing from term to term. Companies are fleeing en masse from Europe and the States to competitive fiscal zones. GDP is falling. Unemployment is growing. We are losing in the wars. There is nothing you can do about it: democracy forbids it!"

"You tried."

"Yes."

"Against your own lobby."

"Because the worst thing is that everyone knows perfectly well what needs to be done! They have known perfectly well for years, probably for a century now,

as the strategies for ensuring the well-being of future generations of Americans have been described. But what good is it if future generations don't vote today!"

"Jesus, it really bothers you."

"If you knew —so you know. Because those minor details —these are usually, directly or indirectly, specialist economic problems, just as suitable for resolution in universal votes as the methods of neurosurgical operations. The threshold of applicability of democracy has been crossed. Further application of its rules brings no benefits to the people. On the contrary, it plunges them into the abyss of economic crisis. I mean," he waved his hand "it just plunged."

"You support Autocracy?" Marina was surprised. "I didn't expect that from you. Whatever you say about democracy..."

"The system is bad, but there is no better one," yes, yes," Hunt interrupted her. "Don't make a fascist out of me, I am not against democracy. On the contrary: despite everything, I still think that it is the most, hmm, healthy system..."

"So why did you start babbling about some kind of threshold?"

Irritated, he reached for his mustache: the chaos in his thoughts extended to motor procedures. "It's hard to explain. It is not precisely defined, blurred by definition. The most popular analogy is the medical one. It goes like this. When you are terminally ill and an operation that saves your life will inevitably also impair you mentally, then you are undoubtedly the only one entitled to choose between death and imbecility. However, once you have decided to have such an operation, the power to choose the most effective method, guaranteeing the preservation of the highest intellectual powers, does not belong to you —but to the doctors. Because you, although it is your brain and your life, do not know anything about it, and when it comes to consultation and the need to indicate the best specialist, you will be guided by such things as: the appearance of your competitors, their charisma, rumors you have heard, unmotivated hunches... a bit of memetic engineering and you're done. You might as well be flipping a coin."

"Did you think of that yourself?" she snorted. "What a revelation! As if people ever understood what they were voting for! Memetic campaigns are not based on programs, as a rule, but on the appeal of 'secondary features.' Do you

think any savage from this neighborhood would understand the content of any political debate? That he would even understand what we're talking about? Not even a thought would reach it. These are platitudes," she repeated, "platitudes, my friend."

"Yes," Hunt admitted without resistance. "But we've perfected this strategy of political warfare now, and beyond. Memetic engineers tell candidate sponsors this to their faces: there are two strategies in this war, and the second is to introduce a completely new product to the market and induce a fashion for it, and that through consistent promotion, a great memetic offensive; that's how you sell new ideas to the public. However, this involves a higher risk factor; a similar path could have been taken in the campaign for the mayor of middle-of-nowhere, but not for congressman or president. Big-budget films rarely have any originality. Showbiz honors the tradition of the Pleasure of Repetition."

"So you ordered sympathy for your grandchildren."

"Exactly. A big, long-term campaign for ten gigs."

"Stupid."

"Yeah, I know it's stupid. Now. Too little a son-of-a-bitch for such stunts."

"But —a genuine patriotic impulse, Nicholas! That's something. You'll have something to remember when you're old."

"Yeah. It follows you around like the stench follows shit. I call Bronstein and act all cocky. So what does Bronstein deduce? That it's an analogous situation: I've gone crazy again, and I'm going to risk my neck for the fatherland, namely by exposing Fungus and Prayer."

"That still doesn't explain why he sent it to you."

"Oh, I'm thinking... unsculpted... Trevelyanist... hanged on the eve of the fall of the state... too radical even for General Kleist... Maybe he was a pathological patriot?"

HELICOPTERS flew over the Zone six times. As they left the "first three quarters" districts and entered the areas of much more sparsely built-up

areas, the strip of what had once been independent suburban towns, it became increasingly obvious that they would not be able to get all the way to the enclaves in this way. In the housing estates of unsculpted tribes, in the jungles of the eternal slums, they could act brazenly, enter them as an Army, pacify the area, clear entire blocks of natives, occupy all places of potential danger. People there were somewhat accustomed to it: whether police, jurdas, gangs, or even the King of the Necropolis and his legions —they were the same elements. Although Marina rightly noticed that for the computers of the city surveillance network, they burned the map of the metropolis like a supernova in the sky, a fiery comet trailing a long tail of destroyed cameras.

Beyond the Tombs, however, it was even worse. To Nicholas's astonishment, corporate patrols appeared juridical, apparently called by the inhabitants. They rode up to the border of the Zone, the AGENTS showed their weapons, the jurdas withdrew. Then they kept a safe distance. Were they waiting for reinforcements? They were from at least three different corporations (counting only the wagons with the logo): none of them could afford to send more people to one place at the moment, especially when no serious crime was involved, and Hunt was very careful not to destroy property marked with the logos of legal insurers, not to enter such properties. He used those of the AGENTS who were insured, placing them on the outskirts of the Zone, in the vanguard of the Army. He also distributed logos collected from the corpses of game animals among the others. There were many of these corpses, especially in the Tombs where the Crowd passed; there and elsewhere, like a wave from the depths of the sea, carrying and leaving behind dead bodies after its departure, including sculpted from even the most distant districts. On the other hand, there were few crimes that the juridical corporations pursued with more ferocity than theft and unauthorized use of their trademarks. Hunt was now afraid only of direct reports, and he tried to avoid open confrontation at all costs.

It was becoming increasingly difficult. It was night, fog (no, there was no fog), but every other window was lit, people flicking through channels, watching the greatest television show of all time: a live broadcast of the fall of a state and the destruction of cities. Those lights were mostly the glow of wall-mounted LED-panels. Through the Fog, some of the countless visual psychomemes emitted by these viewers penetrated Hunt's mind and, despite Fungus, infected his mind: flat images of panic, violence, destruction, madness, animations visualizing statistics, the serious faces of commentators, the tearful ones —of the families and friends of the dead and the destitute. The latter were dubbed "lost" by the me-

dia. A safe word, neutrally coupled, but certainly less catchy than "monkeys."

These weren't the Tombs, the minds of the district's inhabitants hadn't been ploughed through by memes of fear and obedience. One push was enough to set in motion a disastrous trend for Nicholas. In half an hour, he had lost all hope (and he didn't have much of it). Just a moment ago he had been writing to Qurant: 8:00 A.M., BUT I'LL TRY EARLIER. Now he could forget about Four-Leaf.

It had started, of course, with an almost insignificant event. The Devil/Army, in accordance with the script imposed by Hunt, had secured all points in a straight line from Nicholas—at least those to which he had access and to which potential assassins (i.e., everyone except AGENTS) had access. This meant covering every door and window Hunt had to pass. Of course, the Devil tried to choose a route that minimized the number of such points as much as possible, but there was no way from New York to the enclaves that was completely safe from the eyes of the natives. It happened that a retired cop was torn from the TV and rushed to the bathroom by a full bladder. On his way back, the ex-cop looked out the window and saw the Army. Overcoming a sudden stupor, he raised his hand to his mouth and called his neighbor. The neighbor had seen the same thing. He went out to the front of the house, onto the lawn. AGENT486 immediately chased him inside. The retiree called his friends in the service. One of them wanted to take a closer look at the situation and was convinced that none of the cameras in the incriminated area were working. He talked to the program managing the NYPD forces, and two police cars, one with a crew, were moved behind the Tombs. The police cars came across the jurdas. Information was exchanged.

The Devil tried to bypass them, but the police (in this case: public and private, working together) realized and blocked the Army's path. Hidden in the Fog, Hunt saw it all with a thousand eyes. The furthest AGENTS were separated from the police vehicles by dozens of steps.

"They can't see you, sir. Whatever happens—they can't see you."

"Yeah."

If they identified him... he didn't even want to think about it.

"For now, it's some spontaneous gang to them. A big one, that's true, maybe

a Crowd. But it doesn't destroy, it doesn't kill, they have no reason to interfere, especially considering what's happening in other parts of the city. But when they recognize you, sir..."

"I know," Hunt muttered, irritated by the manager's pathological reasoning.

He was sitting on the curb in front of the local Home Delivery warehouse, wrapped tightly in his coat.

Marina sat down next to him, stretching out her long legs wrapped in semi-transparent shadow. Nicholas smelled her perfume and for a moment even suspected an infection after a while. How can a man forget in OVR...

"You know," he laughed darkly, immediately securing himself "I really believed that we would make it..."

"Sir," the Devil leaned over them "there is no reason to despair. I can easily break through."

Hunt looked up.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You have an Army, sir" the Devil explained patiently. "I am talking about a War."

"What?"

"Otherwise they will kill you."

"Shut up."

"They will kill you, sir."

"Did you go into 'Genocide' mode or something? You better get yourself diagnosed."

Lucifer tore his black chest in two with his long claws, revealing a huge, fleshy heart, a leathery, brown muscle, very slowly contracting and relaxing. Woummmm-woummmmmm...

"I'm fine" said the Devil, looking inside himself.

Nicholas made a gesture of a minor exorcism with his right hand, and Lucifer retreated into the Mist, meticulously sealing his chest.

Marina twirled the silver rings on her fingers.

“I don’t think this is the end,” she whispered.

“Hmm?”

“Ravenskull... I think I know why.”

“Well?”

“He sent you Prayer, Efes... so he had them for some time. Why do we assume he didn’t use them himself?”

“Bronstein? He could have. But there’s no indication of that.”

“Really? Think about it. He wasn’t sculpted. How do you know how high his jugrinine was?”

“He wouldn’t have ended up on a chandelier then.”

“Really?” she repeated. “Think about it.”

“Are you saying...,” he frowned “that this is the future he chose?”

“Aha. Look how useful those two Efes were to you, look how lucky we’ve been so far. We’re walking a path of low probability, Nicholas, there’s no denying it —very low.”

“Impossible.” He shook his head. “Who chooses their own death?”

“You indicated the strength of his motivation yourself.”

“Well, yes. But what kind of goal would that have to be? What would Bronstein have to see in his futurmemory to sacrifice his own life as a precondition for realizing his chosen future?”

“Well?”

Hunt stared blindly into the Mist.

“Salvation for the country. At least.”

"I think so too." She took Nicholas's hand (left), squeezed it. "He wasn't influenced by your mishap with the pensioners at all, he wasn't counting on random reflexes. He knew."

Hunt laughed again, even more grimly.

"You're joking! Prayer? As you say, he had it long before I did. What did he do? Nothing. Otherwise, it would have certainly resonated in my thoughts by now."

"Maybe this countertrend..."

"Right! After a week!"

"So something else... it will come true somehow."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah, a national hero, I can see it now..."

Two shots came from the front of the Army. They both turned their heads instinctively.

"It's starting," he stated. "The Devil will be back here soon, to tempt me."

"Nicholas..."

"Please, I can wait for a miracle." Pressing with a cold hand (he felt the coldness of the rings on the back of his head), she turned his head toward her, tearing his gaze away from the Fog, in which the motionless silhouettes of the AGENTS of the Guard loomed

No more words. The Fog seemed to have thickened even more, muffled and obscured everything around. I'll kiss her, Nicholas thought, drawn to Marina with cosmic inevitability, already anticipating the taste of her lips and the expression on her face with which she would close her unbearably blue eyes.

Before he had finished moving, other associations prevailed. Cold pavement. The smell of rot. A biological cesspool. He felt like vomiting. His skin began to itch. A sudden need to move exploded in him. He didn't know what was

happening. That is, he already knew from the floor above: something had broken through Fungus, this was what was happening – but he was unable to control the flood of impressions or organize them into a purposeful pattern. It seemed that in the meantime his muscles had tensed, and he had changed the position of his body, because now all he saw was the Mist. He saw the Mist, he heard the Mist, he felt the Mist. Roar! Kick! Bite! Run, run, run! But he had no legs, no hands, no face. Yet, he remembered running across the green plains; he remembered the blood on his tongue and the heavy bouquets of scents. He could! If only! He remembered, he still remembered. Just to move!

But the Fog —the Fog burned it away. Thicker, heavier, more corrosive, rich with flavors. The terrible acid fire cauterized every nerve ending in him. Hunt lost his sense of the present and the scale of time. For suddenly it was "over" and everything else belonged to a closed set of memories, he did not even try to reach for the fear of the terrible discoveries. He swam through the resinous soup. His comrades were fawning on him in the mating transfigurations of the exobody. The moment of transition was approaching, the conjunction of desires, the gravitational pressure was moving the labyrinthine sexual organs of their endobodies. The universal ocean of this world was equally agitated, the united stars, rarely seen from the life-giving depths of the planet, were drawing all matter toward themselves, organic and inorganic. Hunt, the being operating on Hunt's consciousness, was falling and rising together with the masses of heavy atmosphere, thick colloid, half-alive, certainly more so than the exobody modules thrown into it. He saw (well, at least he had the impression that it was the work of sight) how they were throwing them away. They were similar to him. He could observe the madness of their mating. Numerous shadows and glows. Soon he understood the form of existence. Life on this planet of two suns defends itself against the variability of the environment (an environment with conditions imposed by astrographic billiards) with an onion dualism inscribed in the mechanism of phylogenesis of even the the meanest speck with replication stuffing. So I am I, who am and who will be and in whom slumbers the memory of an infinite line of descendants; and I am I, who am and nothing more. This first "I" is no more than a hairy core, the heart of a vortex, which has the power to weave captured exocorporeal fibers —mine, others', they do not know —into shapes suitable for survival in a new environment; while this second "I" is a great storm of these fibers, an exocorpus floating on waves aroused by the invisible gods of mass. When the season of desire comes, when the small, watery organ of the endobody begins to shake in the physiological fear of solitary existence

—the vortex accelerates, there is consumption and rejection of the strangulated microfibers, mindless hunting for new ones, mutual devouring, swelling to the size of giant driftbulbs, then reconfiguring again —until harmony is achieved, resonance of shapes, and division of the endoorganisms occurs. All nature rages and transforms. It makes no difference that it is about us, because who are we, the owners of the planet? Certainly not. There are more psychomeme generators here than one race, many more, and the reconfigured Hunt floats through the sticky grayness and sees (because he assimilates) that there has and never has been any civilization here, that no graveyard of artificial forms of inanimate matter hides the hard shell of the great globe. There is only a fibrous soup, there are only floating in it as globular machines executing permuted code: endonomic nuclei. They entwine around themselves ever newer and newer bodies, some the size of a thumb (what is a thumb?), some the size of a stadium (what is a stadium?). The God of this world, if we had any inkling of Him at all, would probably abstract Himself to us in the form of a final and pre-first grain, around which the entire Universe is entangled. The undrawn dialectic, if we were to draw it with a symmetrical diagram, would reveal to us the laws of gradational complements: what is the nucleus of what; what is entwined around what; where is all the input information preserved.

...What is God? What is dialectic? What is diagram and information? Hunt's thoughts are lost, Hunt himself is lost: fibers fall from him, Nicholas wastes away and wastes away, his bonds with his body weaken, the channels of the senses are blocked. Until, reduced to a point, to his irreducible Hunt-ness —the endonomic core —he falls like a cold pebble onto Marina Vassone's outstretched hand.

"Nicholas? Nicholas!"

Terrified, she tried to lift him from the ground, but of course she was unable to. She called the Devil. The Devil materialized in the company of three AGENTS, together they pulled Hunt to his feet. He swayed and shook. He babbled incoherently. His sphincters gave way, he stank like game. His right hand also made uncoordinated movements, executing chaotic neural shots and thus firing the simpler macros in random sequences: The fog brightened, then darkened, Lucifer flickered from existence to non-existence and back, the entire MUI kicked the senses from zero to full brightness. The hideous spawn of hell had swarmed out of the night, now rolling through the Fog in hordes of horror. Someone was blowing a horn. Lightnings beat to the rhythm.

From beyond the MUI came cannonades, reinforced by a thousand echoes, Echoes of giant-phone calls to disperse (still the same verbal modules). Apparently the Devil had got his way anyway —if it wasn't War, then at least active reconnaissance by fire. Someone had called in a helicopter —the jurdas or the public police, maybe one of the news networks —for the faint coughs of the rotor pierced through the Fog.

Hunt intended to sit back down, but something got to him and he fell on his stomach instead. The AGENTS immediately picked him up. He dusted off his coat —and that first correct reflex threw him into the spiral of the old attractor. He spat, exhaled. He still felt something icy cold consuming him from the left hip and he winced slightly, turning on his right foot like a cripple.

"What was that?" Marina asked, quietly and without pressure, but cutting him in half with the look of a clinician psychologist.

"Wh..."

"What?"

He spat again.

"Contact," he gasped. "I think so."

"How...?"

"I don't know."

"It must be because of Prayer," Marina mumbled to herself, instantly flying into the world of abstract theories, which he could tell from her eyes and the tilt of her figure. "Yes, it certainly clearly reflects in your mind, and you've focused it on yourself. Such a gigantic psychomeme signpost, an arrow pointing straight to your naked mind."

"So you have what you wanted," he growled, sitting down carefully. "Congratulations on your insight."

The cannonade did not stop.

"Sir..." the Devil began.

Hunt waved him off with a gesture.

(Underfoot: carpet (touch through soft tabi). Before his eyes: naked Hunt stretched helplessly on colorful pillows, a blood donation in the crook of his elbow (look through dark glasses). Association: a medic).

He felt like punching this curb with his bare fist. Damn it, reality can't contradict itself! I can't be in two places at once!

Marina looked at him searchingly from above.

"Who are you?"

"I am... Nicholas Hunt. You?"

"Good." Maybe this is the message: "Don't be afraid, we won't do anything to you...?"

He snorted.

"You speak as if you really believed in your model."

"You said it yourself: Contact."

"How am I supposed to know that? How can I tell the difference between chance and intentional actions, when everything is thought? Maybe I just got hit in the head with a rock. You, in Boston, experienced a greater Contact..."

"In any case, it must have been a powerful monad, since it broke through despite Prayer..."

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know... nothing here holds together. I don't even know what words to use. I don't come up with great theories that easily." Sitting back on her heels, she laughed mockingly, in Vassone's style.

"My God, Nicholas.." She shook her head pityingly. "In reality, there are only successively falsified approximations, a constant war of paradigms. Theories with great explanatory power are too simple to be true, while complicated ones, describing reality precisely, have minimal explanatory power, because they only concern a narrow segment of it. We maneuver in between. You will never get a perfect representation. These are all just analogies. Remember this. A perfect model would be an equally complicated, perfect copy of the original. You would not understand anything. We understand, because we simplify. Thought? Monads? Contact? Don't make the mistake of amateur popularizers of science and

don't accidentally believe her words."

He hated her tone. But at the same time he was glad for it, because there could be no doubt who was speaking: Marina Vassone.

"So not Contact," he gasped. "What then? It's really messed with my head, that's for sure." He still wanted to fall on all fours and roar loudly, from the bottom of his lungs, driving away all his Enemies with one sound. As he had been taught, he directed his own thoughts, focusing on abstractions without designation by force of will.

"It must have been a sensory construct from Nefele," he spurt out. "But also... You know," he suddenly changed his tone and raised his head "I am strangely certain that you have seen too much in it from the beginning."

"Hmm?"

"In thought. There is a purpose in it, but there is no awareness: water will always flow to the lowest point, although it does not plan it in any way. An element, of course, a force of nature. Schatz probably mentioned something... hurricanes, eddies on the surface of the water. Disturbances of the medium, natural forms of intelligence. Not any monads, abstract psychomeme powers. Imagine it as an ocean..."

"Notice that you are building models yourself."

"Yes, I know. I need words." He moved his hand in the air. "A wave is moving across the ocean. What is it? A form of local disturbances: particles up, particles down. The model, of course, is much more complicated, but..."

"Of course. *El Nino*."

"You're kidding!"

"Give it a rest, Nicholas, it's none of your business, you're reinventing the multiplication table..."

However, Hunt was increasingly convinced by it. The element, yes. Unconscious teleology. Let him look at himself: with what intention did he go to Marina then? Did he plan any of what happened later? Did he have such a goal? Any...? In all that time, had he made even one decision that would make

him responsible for bringing about a similar situation? Was there any choice at all?

I looked into the face of Absolute Evil —an unintelligent element.

As he told the psychoanalyst: everything was going by. Worse: despite and against him. Maybe if from the beginning... I mean —since when exactly? From birth...?

Meanwhile, the Devil did not give in.

"Sir..." he shouted from the Fog, himself invisible, a bass banshee.

"What?"

Another one immediately came out, tore the space diagonally, above Nicholas. Shadows burst into the Fog.

Hunt raised his head. A through road from the Tombs, on the left side strong lights from some advertisement, on the right the entrance to the overpass. A guy on a motorbike, an unsculpted raider, is riding along the littered street in crazy zigzags; very slowly, but sometimes suddenly adding gas for a moment. Hanging helplessly over the handlebars, he seems not to be steering the machine at all, rather as if the motorbike were steering him and itself.

At first Hunt thought the guy was dead —but no: the body reacted properly, maintained balance, supported the machine on turns.

A handy magnification spell. A Harley-Davidson.

"Let me guess. Poumpree, AKA, broken dick."

"No electronics, sir. A relic, will go through any lights."

"Bring it here."

The situation on the front looked worse and worse. The more fiercely the Devil/Army defended the Zone, the greater the police forces were bringing in, the harder it was to keep the residents in their homes. Shadows were probably already on their way, and the National Guard was undoubtedly being brought in as well. The AGENTS did not retreat, did not give up their positions. But they were not armed for regular urban skirmishes (most were not armed at all).

He asked the Devil and it turned out that forty-six of them had already fallen.

However, all this was happening two or three blocks away for now. Hunt sat and listened, as if to the sounds of an approaching storm. He could see patches of different lights in the Mist. No one slept here anymore. If it weren't for the AGENTS, he would have had a Crowd in the streets.

The shock and numbness slowly passed. Where was I, on Nefele? I should wash up, change, he thought. Marina was talking to the Devil about something on a private channel.

A Harley appeared ahead of him, driven by an unarmed AGENT, with the deep rumble of an engine.

Nicholas had never even sat on a motorcycle before. It didn't matter: someone had to take Marina anyway. AGENT1 and AGENT3 emerged from the Mist. Passing the severed hand in front of his eyes, Hunt closed the Mood Editor. He stood up without a word. Marina stood there, looking at herself, her head slightly lowered, her lower lip bitten to the point of blood. The real Vassone had no head at all.

He took her from the pheno-asian and sat down behind the SWAT officer, who had taken the place of the slightly battered AGENT, the one who had brought her here on the motorbike. Hunt took her in his arms —and hissed through his teeth: she was burning. Lacking one hand, he had to press her body against him almost like an infant: he couldn't sit her down in front of him, he couldn't put her on his lap. He was afraid she would slip out: she had no limbs, there was nothing to grab onto. Her clothes had come apart, torn, frayed, her bare skin burned to the touch, red in places, yellow in others. Elastic bands held up numerous bloodsuckers plundered from smashed automatics along the way. He couldn't see her eyes, or her face at all. A stinking pus, almost black, was leaking from somewhere. As they rode through the Fog, slowly at first, weaving through the streets, he felt the internal movements of the organism: it was breathing. He even put his ear to it. Something was beating there. Lucifer rode by on his hellish steed. The skeleton horse spewed blue fire from his white skull. He was so big that he could easily jump over a Harley with its riders. Marina sat behind the Devil, hugging him around the waist.

"To Four-Leaf!" Hunt shouted at him. "As fast as possible!"

“Yes, sir.”

Somewhere to the left, buildings flew into the air —roar and fire, fountains of rubble. The war had begun in earnest.

Helicopters roared overhead. He couldn’t see them through the Mist —but the image actually reached his brain.

“FBI CAV!” the Devil shouted over the clatter of the terrible mount’s hooves.

”Are they following us?”

“No, sir. But one of the passengers matches the phenotype you identified as Lieutenant McFly, sir.”

So they tracked us down after all! Who? The EDC, the FBI, Moore, the Team. Are they tracking us? Stupid question. They wouldn’t waste time on that: they would have washed the batch completely. It doesn’t matter whether the trend is up or down —it doesn’t work on a scale of non-random units, an order is an order.

They burst out of the Mist into the clear night. Hunt remembered that his mother had told him to go shopping. He cursed. The constant uncertainty about the nature of the mind, that sense of constant danger... he had no idea whether it was Contact or not. If so, what the intention was. Even if not —what had been added, had been changed in his mind. It was different with Marina: she couldn’t pinpoint the moment of infection, but she easily recognized the attached structures. It’s hard to say that Hunt hadn’t noticed irritating cracks, faults, gaps, inconsistencies in himself before. He couldn’t separate the influences.

Is it even possible to separate them? All this is thought. But what thought itself is —that he did not know.

SCHATZ continued:

“The data I have collected indicate that the susceptibility of human minds to alien psychomeme structures transmitted by thought increases with time. This is not just the Nefele case —I think I will prove this as a general rule quite quickly. The mental immune systems of the psychozoics function well only up

to a certain threshold of psychomeme density, a critical thought pressure. Then the leaks begin. We see the plague of sects spreading, and this is only the most obvious symptom. It does not take a step at all: a few hundred, a few thousand years —and, I suppose, we will all be sensitive enough to call ourselves at least empaths. The influence of thought will become more and more visible.“

He raised his voice.

“But what does it really mean: ‘thought influence?’“ he spewed rhetorically. “Mental infections. What exactly are we infected with? The sources can be of two types: endocultural and exocultural. Endocultural infections are difficult to recognize, because they overlap with extra-thought environmental influences. One can only distinguish them on a macro scale. This is what analytical memetics deals with; specific tools are needed here, and the matter is further muddled by our wonderful memetic engineers, because the trends artificially induced by them have been flowing through thought for years. After all, all of this applied memetics is *de facto* based on psychomemetics, except that we did not yet know the concepts before Vassone; but one contains the other.“

“It is different with exocultural infections,” Schatz took up after a while, ending the digression. “These are immediately obvious. These are things from outside our noosphere. It is impossible to confuse them. Internalization is difficult and takes a long time. But of course, after assimilation, an intracultural trend crystallizes from this: the most faithful possible reflection of the original infection, a variation on the theme. Thus, we assimilate these foreign elements and over time each exocultural trend becomes endocultural —only then it is already a different culture, a different civilization. This happens constantly. We radiate them ourselves, the Nefelenes, and so on. It passes through the mind with an intensity decreasing with distance. Although on a large time scale, distance does not matter so much. Look.”

Fade out. On the LEDwall, a slow 2D animation began.

“Psychosphere A emits its psychometrics into the surrounding mind and, as we can see, infects psychosphere B. Psychosphere B, which is *de facto* already psychosphere B(A), in turn infects psychosphere C. C(B(A)) and D and so on, and *vice versa*, each to each.”

Different colors were assigned to individual psychospheres, and a multicolored fractal was now pulsating on the wall. After a sudden increase in scale,

thought gained an almost uniform shade of light brown.

“A consistent record of the function would be too complicated, these are mutual dependencies that go on into infinity, I refer you to the laws of gas diffusion, observations of the behavior of liquids. In any case —you see the pattern. The entropy of thought is reflected in changes in the shape of civilization. What we receive from Nefele —is a proportional resultant of all the culture spheres that exist and have ever existed in the universe. Including ours, of course. The time of existence of a given culture in its original form is a function of the natural susceptibility to thought of the minds of its bearers and the sum of the distances separating it from other psychospheres. Then potentials equalize, thought becomes locally uniform again; the density remains, but the same psychomemes are produced as in neighboring psychospheres.”

“Nonsense. Thought is thought, but matter has its own rules. You can’t get past objective conditions, evolutionary heritage, the physics of the ecosphere. Physiology has its own influence, and how!”

“Really? Don’t underestimate the world of ideas. After all, we are only at the beginning of this path, our minds are still almost completely isolated. Constant universal anamnesis... biology, for example —is already to some extent a function of thought. Phenotypic fashions will change, lifestyles will change, preferences will change... can you predict what bodies will be fashionable in two, three generations? Aesthetics is the first to fail. Let me quote a fragment of Professor Krasnov’s *Gene Chaos*: ‘Therefore, nothing, literally nothing, passes from mother and father to ‘their’ child, not even mitochondrial codes. The evolution of the species was cut off as if with a lancet, then only the evolution of fashions.’ Fashions, we all know where they come from.”

Schatz was clearly getting worked up and didn’t allow the listeners to gather their thoughts.

“What will come next: the economy. When consumer preferences change, it will turn too. We won’t even notice a change in the direction of long-term trends, such things are never noticed today. Especially not in the Economic Wars. After all, no one plans, everyone fights.“ He leaned even more closely over the lectern, accentuating individual words. “As a consequence, the law will inevitably change. As usual: a little here, a little there; but more effective solutions copy themselves. What sets our standards apart from the law? After all, not custom, not faith, not decency; there is no such thing. Therefore, norms,

standards of ordinariness, criteria of morality will also change.”

He took a breath, straightened up.

“Please run a dozen or so such iterations in your imagination,” he said, now in a quieter voice. “Let’s be honest. How could thinking not win?”

“What do you mean by that?” a tall sculpted form from the first rows jumped up. “To win! You assume intelligence, a plan...?”

“No, of course that was a metaphor. As I said, I stick to the poorest hypotheses —and draw logical conclusions. Since you build a model, you have to be consistent and after setting it in motion, look at it at every moment of the process: yesterday, today, tomorrow, in infinity. We have the mind, Nefele, we have certain premises as to the nature of the influences... We conduct a simple thought experiment and what do we see?”

”What?”

“That in reality in the entire universe, on all planets, in all life niches —there is only one civilization, one culture. One species. In the most literal sense!”

Noise in the hall.

“I repeat: one species! The mind averages out in the end. After all, every civilization, sooner or later, reaches the threshold of technology that allows it to self-sculpt. Even if not, then the idea, the knowledge of self-evolution —they are in the mind. In the long run, no one will be safe. The profiling begins. According to what? According to the trends flowing through it.”

”What do you mean by that? That instead of *Homo sapiens* in x generations we will have here... who? *Psychosoic universii*?”

”Exactly.”

“What are these beasts? Silicon worms? Hot plasmas? Protein humanoids?”

“How do I know? Besides, I say: a resultant species. In the end, we will see for ourselves. That is, not us anymore. Descendants. Will your great-grandson still breathe oxygen? Because maybe oxygen will no longer be fashionable.”

Schatz calmed down, evened out his breathing. In the polemical fever, he

even forgot about NEti.

“Besides,” he shrugged “one can speculate. The features preferred by the ecospheres of the young universe will certainly prevail in the shape. Let’s run Drake’s equation in time and put astrophysicists and biologists to work on it... heavier elements have been in motion relatively recently, so the percentage of forms dependent on them is lower... and so on.”

“So what exactly are you proposing?” A sculpted with an EDC ID snorted. “Because so far, it all sounds terribly fatalistic. Since we can’t do anything about it anyway, because such are the laws of nature...”

“We have to defend ourselves while we still can!” Schatz objected. “Develop some long-term program to protect our psychosphere. Guarantee the preservation of the distinctiveness of man as a species and civilization. Above all, we cannot allow telepathy genes to spread freely. I refer you to Professor Krasnov’s *Gene Chaos* and the polemical works of Doctor Vassone. After all, for God’s sake, we all know that one day the Sun, as a red giant, will burn the Earth to ash, not to mention the inevitable death of the universe—but that’s no reason to give up right away!”

”Any specific suggestions?”

”I don’t know if you’ve heard of Krasnov’s futuroscope, which was presented in another group by Dr. Jugrin. If we could obtain a sufficiently powerful agent or find a genome encoding high susceptibility... to be able to cross the autocatalyzation threshold of the Efes...”

”So what?”

“We would be able to direct events in such a way as to avoid this future! No matter how highly probable it is!”

“I’m not sure if I’m thinking correctly,” the sculpted from the EDC frowned “but I also attended that lecture by Dr. Jugrin and, in light of your interpretation of the mind, it doesn’t look so rosy at all. If they came up with this Efes at Hacienda completely by accident... my God, from a dream!... and then developed it so quickly, easily and flawlessly, then its idea must be reflected in thought in strong and numerous psychomeme structures. I would even say that it is one of the constitutive features of the Psychosoic universe. So the strategy

you propose would only strengthen a trend that is destructive to our identity.”

“But thinking this way, we are putting ourselves in a losing position from the start,” Schatz fumed “because whatever we come up with, *ex definitione* it will come from thought! This is some fucking metaphysical Catch-22!”

”I’m glad you noticed it too,” the soldier commented sarcastically.

KSTP

HE woke up as they passed the exit to one of the Safe Old Age enclaves. It was dawn. A pair of animals were running on all fours along the side of the road —they only caught a glimpse of him.

A hundred and forty per hour. He looked back. New York was shrouded in clouds of greasy smoke, clouds of locusts —Hunt saw something else: a heavy blanket of thoughts. The rays of the rising sun were barely breaking through. In Nicholas's eyes it no longer even looked like a human city. A psychosoic universe; yes.

Even without December, it would have been inevitable. New ideas, new inventions, associations more and more obvious... why are they surprised by such an acceleration of progress since the 19th century. We began to lose immunity, the efficiency of the immunology of minds was decreasing, thought patterns were breaking through more and more easily. After all, this is what the resonance of form is all about: anything once invented/done is much easier to invent/do a second time, although supposedly from scratch. So they leak out more and more: theories, ideas, fashions, cults; science and religion; the average psychomeme pulp of the universe.

No decisions, no plans, no choices —because does anyone make any choices here? If such technologies appear and fashion turns to them, the economy will automatically support them, and the borders of this fractal will swarm with the ever-hungry Krasnovs. Politicians will not oppose, they will not go against social trends. According to the rules of metaxocracy, the economy and law of subsequent countries will adapt as quickly as possible so as not to fall behind

—after all, there is no one who would "rule" over the Economic Wars, who would control the course of events, even to the slightest extent. The Wars rule over us. It is inevitable, this flow along the lines of least resistance, this is how species converge and how civilizations converge. Who will order the rivers to flow uphill?

This is the metaxocracy of the universe.

However, weakened, infected with December, animalized to the last...

AGENT1 turned, braked, the thought fled. Hunt instinctively pressed the hot block of meat to his chest, stinking of blood, sweat and urine, from the inside of which the continental spines of the creature's skeleton were piercing. The Devil/AGENT1 braked a bit, just above the steep slope of the escarpment, along which On the right, the road sloped down to a closed, private park, and beyond, behind the park, where the high fence of Four-Leaf Street gleamed in the fresh sun. The bend itself was partly hidden in shadow, for carved trees of strange species descended low over the inner verge.

"He was supposed to wait here" Lucifer pointed to the information board by the bend, dismounting his horror-horse.

Indeed, that was how they had agreed by e-mail right after Nicholas left the Tombs.

Hunt unrolled the LEDpad from his right forearm. I AM HERE, I AM WAITING, he wrote to Qurant. Julius was clearly busy with something else, however, he did not answer.

In order to free his left hand, Hunt had to hand over Marina's body to AGENT1. Now he stood up from the Harley, stretched his legs. He walked to the railing securing the bend from the outside, a long shadow crawling from his feet down the slope overgrown with superkudzu, toward the enclave. From this distance, he could see little more than the white facades of the villas and the geometric thicket of lush greenery, intersected by threads of paths, alleys and streets.

However, the Devil, who managed the rest of Nicholas's brain recognized the signs of danger.

"Look, sir."

Zoom, zoom, zoom.

A toy abandoned in the middle of the sidewalk.

A couch half-pushed out of the house through an upstairs window.

A man sneaking along the walls, in shadow, hunched, limping.

A partially dressed girl crying on a bench.

A Cherokee parked crookedly on the lawn.

Blood on the window. Or some other liquid of a similar color and consistency.

Hunt sat down on the railing without a word.

"I need a smoke," he said after a moment into space.

Marina, who had sat down next to him, conjured a thin nicotine stick from her black sleeve, the Devil gave it a light.

Nicholas took a deep drag.

"Thanks."

He watched the forms taken by the smoke. The MUI once again went for the ornamentation of death: skulls, ghosts.

"It seems Bronstein didn't take care of it completely," he smiled at Marina (a smile as a mask for anger). "I guess we're not meant to be after all."

"As long as we live," Vassone muttered, casting an indifferent glance at her crooked body —the sweat of disappointment. "Sir, I don't think their minds were actually destroyed there, if that's what you're afraid of."

"You don't think so?"

"This isn't the Tombs' situation. Look closely. If they were monkeys..."

"So what?"

"Some strong monad of extroversion, perhaps aggression; but also fear. The streets are empty..."

“It’s early.”

“Yes. But, sir...”

Tak! Tak! Tak!

Marina screamed desperately, instinctively rushing toward her body —the SWAT man had fallen off his Harley, dropping onto the road.

That was all Hunt managed to see before the Devil/Baryshnikov looped him over the railing and rolled him down the slope; the bullets immediately clattered against the railing.

“Stop!” Hunt clenched his right hand into a fist.

The Devil/Baryshnikov stopped him six feet below the level of the road, in a particularly tall thicket of genetically enhanced kudzu. Hunt instinctively tried to grab onto the plants, pull himself up —they tore and stayed in his hand.

“Image,” he gasped, turning onto his back and searching for support with his feet.

But he no longer had the Army, and there was no talk of a stereographic image —the Devil had only one scanner, from AGENT1. That one was lying under an overturned Harley, bleeding out from numerous gunshot wounds, which Lucifer did not fail to inform Hunt about when he opened for him the image of the clear, blue sky, at which the SWAT man was staring, unable to move his head.

“What the fuck is going on here?!” Hunt growled in OVR, still on adrenaline, terrified, listening for the killer’s footsteps above his head. But there was silence. Hunt, however, was quickly brought back along the paths of worn-out associations by the memory of equally sudden and unexpected shots on the terrace above the rushing Crowd, the unchangeable memory of Colleen’s head falling apart like a rotten watermelon...

“I think he got him, sir.”

“I see that. Not with my hand, not with my foot.”

“The AGENT’s killer. He managed to fire a burst, that was his script.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“He has a built-in silencer.”

Indeed.

”Get a grip, Nicholas!”

“Marina?”

She landed gracefully next to him in a slight crouch, a silent shadow.

“Two shots, but not dangerous, as far as I can tell.”

“I confirm” said Lucifer.

“What now?” Hunt asked them. “Who is that, for God’s sake? Did he see something? If he hit him... Lucifer!”

The Devil obediently played the scan of AGENT1’s V and went back to the right moment. They got an image of a man with a gun in his hand, running headlong between the trees. Enlarged, sharpened. A face: Julius Qurant.

“Well, yes.”

What a face: a living caricature of rage, regret, desperation. He must have been crying. He was shouting something as he shot. Then he tripped and fell.

”Idiot! Idiot, idiot, idiot,” Hunt repeated to himself. I went under the barrel of the madman myself. He showed me the place, the time —and I politely positioned myself on the shooting range.

They waited another ten minutes, but when silence still reigned on the mountain (the dying AGENT1 also heard nothing), Nicholas began to climb. With one hand and the treacherous kudzu as his only aid in climbing —it took him another five minutes to cover those two meters. If it weren’t for Baryshnikov, he wouldn’t have gotten out at all.

Having finally climbed over the railing, he looked around for Qurant. He was lying exactly where AGENT1 had hit him: a dozen or so steps up the slope, his knee hooked on the trunk of a young pine tree.

Hunt took the motorcycle off of AGENT1, carefully moved Marina’s body

onto the grass, into the shadow of a large information board, and climbed over to Qurant.

Julius had been hit through the chest, not very precisely, but effectively. Modern ammunition practically guaranteed death with any shot to the torso or head: submunitions, deforming bullets, nasty mushroom-shaped bullets, soft, liquid, three-stage, poisoned, loaded with ultra-virulent RNAditors... Most of them were illegal, but the SWAT officer had done a good job with his government-issue ergocarbine.

Quurant was breathing very heavily, hissing hideously, giving off bright blood with the air and broken words. His chest smacked loudly with every breath.

“...that... she... kn... w... th... at... y... e... f... e... if... but... no... you... you... would... f...”

It doesn’t make a damn bit of sense, but what can you expect from a person in near-death shock?

“In my opinion,” said the Devil/behaviorist “he didn’t plan it. He took advantage of the situation when he lost his mind to revenge, sir. If he had wanted to from the beginning, he would have done it a long time ago...”

“I didn’t kill her!” Nicholas said bitterly. “Do you hear me?” He leaned over Julius. “It’s not my fault!”

“It doesn’t matter, Nicholas.” Marina put her hand on his shoulder, with her other hand she handed him the nicotine stick. “He could have hated us. That’s what counts. Do you think I really believe that Chigueza murdered Jason? I mean —in the sense that she did it personally or personally gave the order? I’m not that naive. Come on.”

He slowly walked back down to the road. In such a world, he thought, looking down at his feet, in such a world, people always hate, blame, and hold surrogates responsible, because if we really wanted to be just, we would see only victims and we would have to acquit everyone. The alternative is to judge by intention, weakness, and omissions —and then we are all guilty. So am I really not to blame for his wife’s death? Let’s forget about the elements for a moment. Am I not to blame? Colleen, Colleen with the swan neck...

Meanwhile, a spotted dog had wandered in from somewhere. He was now

lapping up blood from the pool by AGENT1's head, his pink tongue working like a fan. Hunt grabbed the dog by the collar, leaned over the SWAT officer, and —he realized that he was missing an arm; on top of that, the pain of the gunshot wound squeezed him above his collarbone, he almost lost consciousness, AGENT1 was in great pain. Nicholas let go of the dog (the animal ran away a few meters), took a few deep breaths, then pulled AGENT1's Corpse-Thief out of his belt and slowly approached the mutt. The dog began to sniff Nicholas's crotch. Hunt shot him in the head.

"Better than nothing" he muttered, as AGENT1409 whined and rolled over on the asphalt.

"What?"

"Hmm?"

"What did you say?"

"That any AGENT is better than no AGENT at all."

"No, no," Marina shook her head. "It wasn't in English. I read your *dossier*, you only know French, and it's bad. It wasn't in French either. Ask the Devil."

"Leave me alone now!"

The enclave stretched out before him in a large model of boxy houses and plastic trees, fabulously sunlit by the rays of the great sun, now still partially hidden in wide veils of pink spreading over a quarter of the firmament. From those colors, a person breathed deeper somehow, stopped to taste the air on his tongue. From this distance, Four-Leaf truly presented itself as an enclave of peace and safety. What a distance it was —all he had to do was close one eye, and it was within reach. A tainted fruit.

"Let him look around," he nodded to AGENT1409.

The Devil sent the dog running down the slope. Of course, the animal would not get inside the enclave, automatic guards operate even in the absence of human overseers —but he could find material signs of the monad's influence, help mark the range.

"If I had the Army..." Nicholas wondered further, massaging the SWAT's

gunshot pain in his chest. “What about it?”

“Too much distance, sir.”

If he had the Army, he would use Prayer on a thousand minds and drive away the monad. He could also use Prayer without the Army, using the program for its intended purpose, that is, to modulate the emissions of Fungus from foreign Toulouses —but none of the residents of Four-Leaf had the implant, their constitution forbade it.

On the threshold of the promised land —and denied. He sees, but cannot enter.

Yet this is only about restoring peace to their minds, shielding them from the storm. He suddenly realized that the whole thing was much simpler than all these models would suggest. Because was there ever such a moment —it reached right to the deepest layers of his memory, that is: its present version —such a moment in which he could say: “Here is the real me?” Never. He remembered his mother remembering him still inside the incubus —that is, he remembered himself in this way —that is, he was her. Later, when he grew up —the same. With his father (oh, why didn’t he really die...?) —the same. With children at school —the same. He remembered such lessons during which, in response to the teacher’s question, he would remain silent or give the wrong answers, even though he knew the right ones perfectly well. But none of the other children knew them, so he couldn’t, he was not able to say them! But, damn it, he was still himself! That didn’t make him a beast! Yes, he wrote the truth: memory cannot be relied on either, it too is subject to evolution according to a personal Program. Similarly, one cannot rely on the products of the senses, the associative matrices, the superficial thoughts. All this comes from thought, presses; a body of monads. But it also does not constitute identity. These are just data that the Program operates on. Consciousness —consciousness is a process, not a state.

He put the Harley down, sat sideways. The nicotine stick was still just as long, he could have smoked it forever. AGENT1 must have finally died, because the marker next to the MoP icon had changed. As for Qurant, he had no intention of checking. Marina had engaged in some private chat with the Devil.

In essence, he repeated to himself, looking at the enclave from under half-dropped eyelids (from time to time a plastic figure would flash in the fairy-tale town: a bright head, a long shadow), in essence, it was only about allowing the

Programs to operate freely. It didn't matter what had leaked from the mind, it didn't matter the added memory, all those embedded psychomemes.

Schatz is wrong —the priority is by no means "preserving the distinctiveness of man as a species and civilization." Even as *Psychosoic universii*, we will differ in Programs and in this sense we will remain human; but not —as beasts, not —in such a strong grip of monads.

"Marina!"

He had to call her twice more. She finally approached him together with the Devil.

"Do you perhaps have software for the design and production of RNAdation viruses in the ROM of Vittorio's nano? After all, Vittorio somehow procured this truth serum for me, regenerative bionano..."

"What are you on about?"

"Do you have it?"

"I have it, I think I have it."

By doing so she admitted that her implant configured from that nano had been working for some time; but he passed over that in silence.

"I'll copy the conference documentation for you with the Corpse-Thief. There are attached files there with reference DNAMs, also Estep. Apply them to my DNAM, yours, whose you can still find there —as long as it's old. A fragment of DNA replaced by Estep, and you'll get this from matching, cut it out and print in December it in its place. Synthesize it for me as soon as possible. Of course, the droplet transfer route and no preliminary conditions for liberation. Besides, what am I going to tell you, you know more about it than I do."

"Finally, sir."

"Excuse me?"

"I've tried to explain to you many times, sir, that the simplest solution is to reverse December and release a Counter-Estep, but you've never deigned to listen to me, sir, and..."

“What? You didn’t say anything like that! Are you trying to tell me that you came up with it yourself?”

“Yes, sir. It’s a simple reversal.”

“You’re lying, Devil. Whatever, I would definitely remember that.”

“Of course. I beg your pardon, sir.”

Hunt watched the Devil leave with a distrustful look. What was going on with this manager?

He took a drag on his nicotine. Of course, this, hmm, Counter-Estep wouldn’t solve everything, because December would still be around. But Counter-Estep would undoubtedly increase the total resistance to thought, protect against general animalization, make it harder for a Crowd to form, and allow for at least periodic pacification of areas occupied by plant monads. In time, someone would probably construct an improved version of counter-step, for example, completely immunizing people to Estep, and thus also to December.

Really, it’s strange that no one had thought of it before, after all it was so simple—a trivial inversion of December’s idea. Really, why didn’t I think of it before...?

AGENT1409 reached the border of the enclave, and the Devil suggested opening a scan. Nicholas told him to turn the dog around, as it could prove very useful as a new virus spreader.

Something’s wrong here, he thought, walking toward the information board. Counter-Estep was so obvious...

“Do you have it yet?” he asked Marina, who was standing over her body with her hands behind her back, probably not very present in the OVR.

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“I’d bet that’s what Bronstein meant,” she said, looking up.

He shrugged.

“Can you breathe on me?”

“I’m not very strong,” she smiled dryly. “Lower.”

He went into parody (which is a form of forms) and knelt on the grass next to her body. She watched —of course now only with his eyes, or rather thanks to his eyes, because the angle of vision simulated a different one for her —she watched as he folded his torso in a caricature of a pious Muslim’s pose and touched a brown spot of petechiae with his lips on something that could have been her back, stomach or thigh —but in reality it probably no longer belonged to human anatomy at all.

“Nicholas?”

“Mmh?”

“I don’t think I can hold out much longer. If you can...”

“Dear God, Marina...”

The motion editors were certainly smoothing out her image a lot, so he was unable to read from her appearance, facial expressions, gesticulations (as usual very sparing) what was really breaking through from the surface with this openly expressed request for the first time. But he was somehow not curious, he did not want to look there (he even instinctively moved away from the body). Fear, no doubt, fear for life, and the ever-rotating ying/yang of despair/hope. What else —he didn’t want to know. Only truth in the distance. He remembered that fatal telephone affair, the girl’s face as she looked into his eyes, slowly understanding; and her last call.

Now I know what it is, he thought. Now I know. Right here —he made a desperate decision —I will break all labels, shatter forms, jump off a bridge, close my eyes and expose myself, rip my guts out before her eyes. Vassone, Melton-Kinsler or the military nano-machine implant —it doesn’t matter. Yes. When she asks, I will answer clearly and honestly. There will be no more MUI between us. I will ask for forgiveness. Let her understand. I know she will. There will be again, as once with Imelda, light and darkness, the soul at the fingertips...

He looked up at her. She was staring at him with a kind of desperate tension. What could have leaked to her thoughts?

“Even then,” she whispered “I knew it wasn’t you.”

He stood up, straightened. Could Marina Vassone have said something like that?

“Well,” he grimaced, ostentatiously cynical “I didn’t know that.”

“Nicholas,” she began and could tell from her face that she was going to confide in him “I..”

“No, no!” he waved his hands. “Why are you telling me this? Why? What the hell has suddenly come over you to...” He was at a loss for words, he finished with his hand.

Pumping his anger back inside, he turned away from her, dusted and smoothed his coat, wiped his mouth. Nothing remained of the firm resolutions of ten seconds ago.

Because what else protects us from blackness, if not form? There are boundaries that should not be crossed. What was the best thing she wanted to do here? I understand, she’s afraid of death, but —for God’s sake! a little tact...!

“Sir,” the Devil butted in “I strongly advise you to remove the bodies from here and pull off the road. It’s clearly not very busy, but if some...”

“Are you so smart?” Nicholas snarled in a flash of rage. “You’d better think of a way to infect those in the enclave!”

“I don’t know if it makes any sense, since both Colleen and Julius Quirant are dead, sir.”

Hunt was chilled by this. Because really, what right did he have to demand entry to the Four Leaf? He wanted to throw himself at Lucifer’s throat and strangle, strangle, strangle...

Then it dawned on him:

By the right of the savior from the Plague, that’s what it is.

He laughed out loud. Not a traitor, but a savior! We can start a trend like that, why not? What about the support of Prayer!

Throwing away his cigarette, he went to the Harley. I'll be a fucking national hero yet!

Let me put it this way: I bring you a future in which I won't...

He froze mid-step over AGENT1's body. He understood everything. He remembered. Jugrin's lecture, the bundle of timelines squeezed inside. Himself.

There is no contradiction. It is as it is: I am standing here over at Four Leaf and sleeping on colorful pillows in Hedge's isolation cell at the same time; Sneaky Fucker is alive and dead; I have a hand and I don't have a hand; Marina is healthy and Marina is dying...

Because somehow it so happens that when considering probable futures we always look forward from our "now," assuming ourselves as a point of reference—and never suspecting the opposite order. Now I know: I live in a composition of uncertain variants, I live in someone else's future memory!

I live in someone else's —Bronstein's—future memory, and the reduction has not yet occurred. Exactly as Major Fuzz said. He will decide only *post factum*.

So the trend that dominated the rememberer will define me. I will come true in the optimal variant: this or that; so maybe my whole odyssey will not turn out to be true at all and will disappear, flattened to improbability?

Will I survive? Won't I survive? Even if so—as who? Marina? Of the two equivalent stories, it is always nicer to remember the one that ends with at least some semblance of a happy ending. But on the other hand: form demands tragedy. Black, black covers everything.

It won't end well, no.

LUCIFER'S earlier prophecy came true and the sound of a speeding car came from behind the bend. A vintage sedan came out from behind the trees and immediately began to brake with a screech of tires, turning sideways in a controlled skid. In the seat next to the driver, Nicholas clearly saw the face of Lieutenant McFly through the window. The Devil/Baryshnikov threw Hunt toward the barrier and the escarpment, but Nicholas stopped him with a single gesture of his right hand. He raised the ergocarbine and (Ranger on) pumped

the rest of the magazine into the sedan, killing the driver on the spot, wounding McFly and completely destroying the front of the car.

McFly fell out of the car and rolled to the side of the road; finishing the movement, he smoothly got to his feet. A speeding AGENT1409 jumped at his throat. McFly only managed to shout: "Hunt! No!"

Hunt let go of the useless carbine. Baryshnikov caught him in its claws again. He was already putting his leg over the railing when he was stopped again and turned around. He ran to the sign, lifted the hot body. Harder now. He shouted at the Devil. Up the slope and down. Behind him he could hear AGENT1409 growling and Lieutenant McFly shouting.

He went down the prickly lining of kudzu, about twenty meters. Another hundred meters separated him horizontally from the gate in the enclave. He immediately started walking toward it (he was unable to run with Marina in his arms), although he knew perfectly well that the gate would not open for him; but as he walked, he was less afraid. It even seemed to him that through the noise of his own breathing he could hear the characteristic hurl-whir of helicopter rotors.

That thing he was carrying —he knew it was not Marina: she was walking next to him. But he hugged her, embraced her, pressed her to his chest, bowed his head. As if already sensing the streams of hot bullets and wanting to absorb them all himself. He twisted his face, perhaps to fury, perhaps to tears. The thing was heavy, but the weight didn't matter. He didn't care who saw. He knew they were aiming. Please. Already a pale half-smile. If he had thought there was hope for a reversal of fate... How lucky Vittorio was!

The dog stopped barking, but someone was running heavily down the slope. Hunt didn't look back. He placed one foot after another evenly, chanting persistently in his mind.

They can't kill me yet, he repeated to himself. They can't; not yet; it can't happen. After all, I haven't freed the Counter-Estep, and I haven't —yet —given a future free from the threat of total animalization, so that humanity can calmly pursue the trend toward *Psychosoic universii*. Because if the universe were inhabited by animals, who would have discovered Efes, not to mention the wheel, differential calculus, electricity and computers? These can't be animals! I served to prevent this eventuality here, to invent a Counter-Estep.

Why aren't they shooting? He couldn't accelerate. He stumbled over mole-hills. The Devil was with him on the right, Marina on the left.

Only at dawn does grass smells so distinctly...

Eighty, seventy meters to the gate.

"Send a request for asylum, sir?"

He didn't even answer.

Armed soldiers were spilling out of the EDC CAVs that had landed between him and the enclave, the commander jumped out of the nearest one. Hunt tightened his grip on the hot stump of Vassone's disfigured body and, against his will, slowed his pace, stopped.

He was aware of how hideous he looked now, pale, hairless, his scalp lacerated by kudzu, in a dirty, torn coat, with a hideously scarred forearm.

But General Kleist smiled at him happily, Anselm grinned Anselm-like. Hunt could smile back at them now, because he didn't believe in the rationality of memory.

Kleist reached out for the Prayer discs

IV

Into the Ocean

LEANING against the rail, he smoked a real nicotine cigarette. The ash, still glowing red, fell in lumps that glowed in the dark in invisible waves. Because he couldn't see the ocean —only a great plane of blackness, from horizon to horizon. He could smell the salt, the damp wind on his face. When he lifted his head, the starry sky, unexpectedly clear of all advertisements, announcements, logos, struck him in the eye. Then, with his eyes, he would automatically trace the lines of the constellations, find the paths of the planets appropriate for this time of year. Face to face with Jupiter, he strained the bitter smoke from his lips; his hand no longer trembled. The deck of the *Curtwaiter* clanged metallically behind him, the Devil's hooves slid across the steel plates.

"How?"

"They're still counting, sir."

Marina, who was sitting freely on the railing on the left, completely invisible in her black polysilk if not for the ship's position lights, now reached for Nicholas's right hand, tightened her fingers on his.

"You won. You know."

Did he win? He himself wasn't sure whose victory it was —His? Bronstein's? The intellectuals? Counter-Estep won't change it anyway, the future was decided: *Psychosoic universii*. The rest is a matter of time —a thousand or ten thousand years; what's the difference? In the end, the most popular form will prevail, the power of fashion. They won't avoid it.

"Anselm is coming."

Preslawny approached, nudged Nicholas in the shoulder; Hunt looked around.

"Let me in," muttered Anselm.

Nicholas nodded to the Devil. Lucifer snorted, tore open his hairy wrist with his thumb claw and sprayed Preslawny with his blood.

"Ugh!" Anselm even took a step back. "No wonder you're in such a bad mood. Doctor, it's good to see you again." Back to Nicholas: "Will you take out that beast!"

"Get out, Luci."

"You'd do better to switch to mine."

"Which one do you use?"

"Barok Twelve."

"I don't know that one."

"Much less depressing, I assure you. All right. Have you talked to Oiol?"

"Yeah."

"What did you decide?"

"A Departmental Statement and full honors. The jurdictor is haggling over the declassified items. I'll never set foot in a government building again. A charge of endangering life as a guarantee. Life in the fed, if I stick my neck out."

"What's this about? Those cops? The jurdictor didn't defend you? Self-defense."

"No, they dropped that. It's about the Kaestep. I was in the same helicopter with you. I breathed. Twelve of us. Then the soldiers went to their own... The entire base by dusk. Premeditated spread of an uncertified genetic reconfigurator. After the Plague decree, there's a cap for that."

"Jesus, Nicholas, you saved all their asses with the Kaestep!"

Hunt shook his head, brushed off some ash, smiled crookedly at Marina.

"Anselm, Anselm... you still don't get it. That's beside the point. Besides, to tell the truth, I rather worsened my situation than improved it. They had specialists, entire staffs, budgets, five days of time —and they didn't think of such an obvious thing! They're furious."

"I didn't think of it myself; I don't understand. Because, now I see that it's obvious."

"Yeah," Nicholas laughed, "now suddenly all the geneticists in the world will see that it's obvious! But introducing a meme into the pool, breaking trends... He had to hang himself, it was so unlikely."

"Exactly, they did an autopsy on him, I mean, Bronstein; you can get tissue from the coroner and calculate the jugrinine. The FBI took him under the microscope again anyway, in connection with the investigation into Prayer; they'll exhume him if necessary."

"Do you think it can be calculated, just like that?"

"Why not? Did he buy himself out completely? Because you said he was a Trevelyanist, right? Who has the rights to his DNA? You'd have to patent it."

"Talk to Krasnov. He was here a moment ago."

"Hmm?"

"In OVR."

"Was he? Why?"

Marina snorted maliciously, folding her arms across her chest.

Anselm looked at her questioningly.

"You remember Efes, right?" she asked.

He nodded.

"So Krasnov is going with the trend," she sighed. "Since he discovered the rule, he will now exploit it until it is completely sterile. He has this September RNAdition scheme... First, a genome was put into it that shortens the lifespan of

sperm; then —blocking their production altogether. Then —the core of Estep, the characteristic genome of telepaths, lowering resistance to thought, and that was December. Krasnov is currently working on April: he will put the Efes code there.”

Anselm was speechless. You could see him trying to imagine a full-scale realization of this idea, trying and trying —and failing.

He leaned against the railing next to Nicholas when the deck began to rock too much under his feet.

”I’ve been away from the Hacienda for too long,” he finally gasped.

”When exactly did you disappear?”

”As soon as Iris let me know.”

”She knew about Fungus from you.”

”Somehow...” Anselm shrugged. ”You see, the bed situation, people talk about everything, gossip, not gossip; and it wasn’t secret after all.”

”Just so,” Vassone repeated sarcastically, looking ahead into the night. ”Everyone here is ’just so’. No one ever does anything of their own free will, by design, on purpose; everything flows. What would Cain say if asked today? ”Oh, just so; my knife slipped, the clouds were thick, it smelled of wormwood.” Only Krasnov the freak... and Nicholas, when he stops feeling sorry for himself. The rest... Oh, fuck it!”

She jumped into the sea.

Anselm raised his eyebrows.

”What’s wrong with her...?”

”As if you didn’t know. She’s still waiting. They’ve washed her blood out for the third time. Nothing is known yet.”

”Damn. Sad.” He quickly changed the subject. ”Did you watch the address?”

”Yeah.”

”I’ve already heard a new rumor: that the president was really aped too, but

Radick edits him live, so no one will know the difference. Heh, heh.”

”The hundredth splinter of the myth about the White House on the strings of megabusiness sponsors.”

”What, isn’t that right?”

”*Et tu*, Anselm?” he sighed Nicholas. ”Another conspiracy theorist!”

”We all know that conspiracies do exist.”

”Conspiracies? Conspiracies?” Hunt laughed maliciously. ”What are you calling a conspiracy? Name the conspirators; tell us the plan; and how successful was it? Come on, man: conspiracy theories, in order to work in reality, would have to change the fundamental laws of the universe. Either they increase or entropy increases; and in our universe, entropy increases. No crime is as difficult to reconstruct as one in which nothing went according to plan; no criminal is harder to catch than a random one; nothing is more fantastic than a Sherlock Holmes deduction. The chances of achieving one’s goals decrease exponentially with the number of actions necessary for success. I like to believe that someone or another is planning some kind of a gigantic conspiracy; but when it comes to action, entropy interferes and we get wild chaos.” Nicholas waved his hand at the dark element beyond the freighter’s side. ”Then you look, desperate to find patterns, and as soon as one element is added to another, you shout: ”*U-Boat!*” ”Shark!” ”Kraken!” That was just a wave twirling the seaweed.”

Gears creaked, machinery squealed —they raised their heads reflexively. The twin water-to-air missile launchers mounted on the deck above them began to rotate after an unseen target. Since the beginning of the Plague, the *Curtwaiter* had been under strict quarantine, now even stricter: no one was allowed near it who had not been thoroughly plowed with Kaestep and cleansed of December. From what they knew, a similar procedure was also in force on Air Force One, which had also not approached any population centers since the President’s evacuation from Washington. The *Curtwaiter* was currently two hundred nautical miles offshore, cruising in a long figure eight, far from trade routes.

They didn’t see the plane’s lights; eventually the launchers froze.

”I haven’t thanked you yet,” Nicholas said, throwing out his cigarette and straightening up suddenly; Preslawny straightened up in embarrassment as well.

"The general. The trend almost finished me off."

Anselm smiled, shrugged, scratched his head, and looked out into the night.

"You're welcome. She had pangs of conscience, because at first she believed it easily and gave the order too. Then, when we followed that corpse from the hotel to Langolian and Prayer came to light..."

"She won't let Marina off the hook, will she?"

"No. Life in prison at least. Maybe the chair. The matter is in the hands of the EDC. This isn't even about the program itself, but about this the gateway to Toulouse, Langolian's secret access codes; and the betrayal of state secrets. Don't even try to convince her, she respects you now: you stood up for yourself, you found the truth, you exposed yourself, you were kidnapped, you were defamed; you're a victim."

Nicholas was shaken. A victim!

"I talked to her jurdictor's people," Hunt told Preslawny after a long moment. "I mean: Marina's. I was on the team that determined the interpretation of implant-related crimes; so I know a thing or two. The Supreme Court hasn't ruled yet, there were no precedents. These accusations can be overcome."

"Even if they do. That leaves betrayal. Sorry."

"Betrayal... We all betray, Anselm, betrayal is included in the cost, it just so happened that the consequences of Marina's betrayal exploded in such a shitstorm; but none of us can ever predict the final consequences."

"Just don't tell Iris that by any chance."

"Iris probably knows that, though."

They were silent. The sound of water ploughing through the rusty hull of a freighter. The creaking of metal. The howling of a demon. The steady hum of engines.

"You're my only friend, Anselm."

"This sky is beautiful."

THERE were no cameras in his cabin and Marina didn't like coming there, she had to rely only on Nicholas's eyes, all the more aware of the cold scythe of death touching her neck. He lay alone, the smell of the sea pouring in through the open porthole above the bunk, underlined by the obligatory smell of a fresh grave from the MUI. Before the sun had even set, Nicholas had looked at the ship. Iron horns grew from the superstructures of the *Curtwaiter*, a caged skeleton wavered at the bow, rust the color of old blood covered the steel surfaces, while cold fire reflected in the glass; a winged demon sat on the main loading crane and howled at the wind. Not the Flying Dutchman, but definitely a ship from hell. At night, in addition to the usual creaking of the multi-ton structure rolling over the waves, Nicholas heard the groans of the damned.

He had looked into the medical compartment earlier. Since it was impossible to allow information to spread, and any approach of any of the initiated persons to the population affected by December guaranteed such a successful leak, isolation was necessary. If not the *Curtwaiter*, then the Hacienda of the Four Dry Springs—but even there they had no specialist equipment or the appropriate experts. So they had been brought here. The body was lying in an oxygen chamber, in a tank of plastic nano, already amoeboid in two cubic meters; it absorbed the food it was supplied with without losing matter, but the metabolic processes did not slow down, the temperature remained at the limit of forty degrees Celsius. The body did not move even once, as Hunt watched. On the left, a square bony composition pierced the skin, a milky-yellow crest of processes touched the transparent partition. Nicholas pressed his fingers on the other side. After a moment, he felt a trembling—but he did not know: from the body? from the medical mechanisms? from the ship's machines? In the dim light, the skin of the nano-tumor was sepia-colored. He hid in his cabin.

He lay on his back, legs straight, and only his right hand moved. Since Toulouse had been unlocked for him, he had answered over a hundred phone calls. He was surprised that he had been allowed uncensored communication with the outside world at all; probably another friendly gesture on the part of General Kleist, an outstretched hand of consent. But he was by no means no longer bound by the legal restrictions and oaths of secrecy; he was not under arrest, but he was a US citizen.

Unblocking Hunt's Toulouse was possible because as soon as EDC computer

scientists analyzed Prayer, Toulouse 12 was constructed —it dismantled the old implant and crystallized a new one, already (as Nicholas was assured) safe; copying software from one to the other was done automatically. Hunt accepted this indifferently —he had no way of stating indisputably what they were injecting into him; where OVR ends and RL begins. Everything is conventional. Only Hunt's Wager remained in force. So he behaved as if no one had ever hacked into his implant —an hour, two, three, and finally he would forget, fall into the old ruts of reflexes, and everything would be real again.

Thumb, index, ring finger up, finger down, fist —the magic flowed in a swift stream. The night in the Caymans was muggy, humid, the slightest breeze did not stir the palm fronds. The glasses sweated cold drops from the iced tea that Imelda poured for him on the patio; he licked them from the tips of his fingers. Above the palms they could see the lights of helicopters, probably unmanned, circling the resort, where riots had been raging for four days. The sky —normally clear, because of the tourists —outlined appeals to disperse and stay at home. They drank tea, said nothing. Imelda played with her ring. Earlier, Nicholas had conjured up his hair, mustache, his old face, elegant clothes —so he was the same, Imelda, on the other hand, was different: shadows under her eyes, an uncertain smile, hair untidily pulled back in a ponytail. He respected that; since she doesn't edit herself, he doesn't edit her either. They sit not on opposite sides of the table but next to each other, and Imelda finally slid down in her chair, tilted her head to rest on Nicholas's shoulder —her muscles immediately began to ache in the uncomfortable position, the MUI simulated a non-existent support, Nicholas wasn't here with her after all; she was alone... she burst into tears. Gaspar's inarticulate screams erupted from inside the villa anew. She stood up, wiped her tears, went to change his diapers. Senator Tito had stayed in New York too long. Nicholas lifted his glass, poured tea into his palm. He watched the liquid flow between the bumps in the skin, here the River of Long Life, there the Stream of Happiness, mindlessly, but always toward the lowest points. There was machine gun fire in the city. He rolled over on his bunk on his side. "They're still counting," the Devil said.

He entered Santuccio. The restaurant was empty; as ordered, it had been closed immediately after the Plague broke out. Nevertheless, the insurance network was still active, and the Team's sneakerheads had slipped in after forty hours of struggle (that is, searching for backdoors to the crypto that protected the crypto that protected the crypto... and so on, all the way to the notary machines, starting with the weakest link in the chain). The Team's empty rooms in

the Cygnus Tower were out of the question, because there was no network there at all —and all the Team members knew Santuccio, and besides, all he had to do was cross the footbridge to the other side of the street. The lights were off, the tables crowned with chairs loomed in the semidarkness, and he subconsciously gave the rickety structures a wide berth. But then, with premeditation, he stepped through the glass and iron bars onto the restaurant's terrace.

Schatz was already waiting. He watched the fire brigade team tearing up the coating of a rudder that had fallen onto the parks and overpasses a block away.

Nicholas tapped his cane louder, Ronald turned around.

"Mr. Hunt!"

They bowed to each other.

"I think I should congratulate you."

"I should rather congratulate you!" Schatz smiled broadly.

"In that case, let's forget about it. Have you signed the contract yet?"

"Yes."

"What are you planning?"

"I don't think we can do without those bases on the Mar Imbrium, not after December. Of course, I'll have enough Estepers, but I'd rather go for more rigorous methods."

"What do you mean?"

"Aesthetic neuromatrices. We'll buy the patent from the heirs of IG Parben. I mean —I hope we can afford it. It hasn't even balanced out yet."

"No, they're still counting. Aesthetic neuromatrices, you say... that's from that psychomeme computer. Do you believe in that?"

"Thinking as a computer? No. But the matrices themselves seem useful: they're the only precise tool. Because they're not people. People... you see. Instead of finishing, he waved his hand at New York."

Nicholas remembered the identical gesture from their first conversation in

“Santuccio,” and a barrage of associations went above the surface of his consciousness. He quickly executed a MindMaster mudra and wrote down the escaping train of thought. “Chain seventeen,” said the Devil.

”But what do you want to use them for?” Hunt continued to ask.

“These will be a few parallel programs. I am already talking to the Pentagon and Kleist about expanding the arsenal, we need at least ten thousand thematic animal monads, several hundred specialist ones. Of course a mind map from our arm of the Milky Way —from beyond Nefele; because something is for sure, she is simply the closest.”

“Exomemetics.”

“Yes. Apart from that, we will see what the markets show after our counter-attack. A lot of work.”

“I will add something else. As I understand it, the rate of *Homo sapiens* sliding toward *Psychosoic universii* is directly proportional to statistical susceptibility to thought. December weakens us, Kaestep protects us. So think of a virus that would insert not the genes of a telepath, nor of an average non-telepath —as my Kaestep does —but the genes of a person exceptionally resistant to thought. An amedium phenomenon. I don’t know if such people exist; it seems probable to me, the population should have a Gaussian distribution. Conduct research. Draw from volunteers, profile, look for correlations with DNA. There is such a house in Montana... you will find the details in the Team archives. Ideal for quick elimination tests. Find an anti-empath and buy the rights to his DNA. Then this virus will be released —let’s call it July —without racial restrictions, on all of humanity, because only then does it make sense. July should buy us time until the whole world switches to incubi —then the thing will be introduced by the UN as an element of the mandatory genframe. Of course, this won’t stop the slide toward the *Psychosoic universii*, because the mutations of our psychosphere are of primary importance in it, the genome is only a correlate —but we will delay the process, maybe in the meantime some other Bronstein will appear and push us even harder against the trends of thought. What do you say, Ronald?”

Schatz looked at Hunt and said nothing.

”Oh, what a revelation!” Nicholas patted Schatz on the shoulder in a friendly

manner. "You belatedly realized that your boss wasn't such an idiot after all. What?"

"Well, he's not for sure now. We all change," Schatz replied enigmatically and looked away. "Thanks for the idea, I'll check for sure. Do you want a certificate in the files?"

"It doesn't matter now; take it from me. Will you keep Anselm?"

"If he wants to stay. You know Fortzhauser is dead?"

"What happened?"

"He was driving home the night December started to come out, and ran into one of the first Crowds. They found him in the river later, with his fingers and genitals bitten off."

"Ugh."

"I've got McFly for now, though I'll have to let him go on extended sick leave soon. Oh, and the FBI returned the stuff you gave Moore to study, it's ready to go."

"Thanks. Good luck."

"I'll be an even worse boss than you," Ronald grinned.

"You realize that you've already screwed up: my clearance for this level of secrecy has been revoked, you've just given me a few state secrets."

"Yeah, I can see you selling them to the Chinese," Schatz laughed, transformed into a bat and flew high into the night sky, among the winged monsters; Hunt watched him go. The team was no longer working in Cygnus Tower, New York would not be free of December for a long time —if it ever was.

Firefighters set off the charges, and the cut-off sublevel of the skyhouse collapsed with a monstrous roar forty stories down, a cloud of dust blocking the perspective of the street. The surrounding alarms were screaming. Imelda returned to the patio. She leaned back against the wall. "It has to start raining eventually," she muttered. "What a stuffy place." "Did you check on your mother?" He turned the chair around, straddling it. "She doesn't want Toulouse. I called yesterday. She was worried about you."

“Exactly.”

“No. Now. Calm down. When does your contract end?”

“In seven months. In case you didn’t know. We were supposed to extend it.”

“You know he’ll never rebuild the destroyed structure of his mind.”

“When are you not reminding me? Look! It’s good that you remind me so often, I would have forgotten.”

“There will be specialist clinics. You have a good prenuptial agreement.”

“Are you trying to comfort me or offend me?”

“Okay, I’m gone.”

The Bunker II’s OVR survived despite the closing of the Bunker in the Bronx. EDC info-economists were connecting from hermitages scattered across half the country, the black crystals processing Bunker II were still in Bunker I.

This time Kleist did not keep Hunt waiting, and he had little time to read from the tactical visualizations about the state of the counter-offensive.

“Mr. Hunt. Nicholas.” The general greeted him at the door, shook his hand firmly. She looked very tired, her fatigue broke through even through the double MUI, nevertheless she smiled broadly, spoke loudly, led Hunt with decisive movements.

Kleist’s office in Bunker II opened out through large windows onto a coral reef, colorful discharges glided outside these windows, schools of tiny fish shimmered. The dark blue water colored every thought, every association —they moved more calmly here, spoke slower, breathed deeper.

“I’ve already apologized to you, but I’ll do it again...”

He waved his hand.

“Come on, really.”

“Okay. But I owe you.”

Hunt raised his eyebrows.

“How much?”

She lowered her gaze to the desk, intertwining her fingers.

“I can’t, Nicholas. The law is the law. We’re adults, we’re responsible for our actions. I can’t. Don’t ask.”

“You know she probably won’t live to see it anyway.”

“The proceedings won’t start for a few months.”

“In those few months...”

“Do you realize the damage she’s done? Do you?!” She leaned back, took a breath. “It’s over, let’s leave it.”

“Chigueva” Nicholas said.

“She disappeared into the Indian Buffer Zone. Most of Langolian’s top brass disappeared like that. According to the law, we can’t do anything to them. They are already citizens of other countries, ninety percent of the Group’s liabilities are outside the jurisdiction of the States, and their assets have been scuttled. In time, we will probably file for extradition under the articles of conspiracy, murder, and attempted murder...”

“These attacks on Marina, Jason, and Hedge?”

“Yes. Except for Hedge, we probably won’t even have a basis for an indictment; besides, in the other cases, the lawyers are not too sure about theirs either. Unless suddenly some crown witness show up. But even then —the bastards are not that stupid, they will not appear in countries with which we have agreements.”

“Outside the law? The CIA?”

“If they had some information, if it could bring some benefit... but like this? Out of revenge? Revenge is not a political category, Nicholas. Besides, it is not my field. But I would not bet on it.”

Hunt only shifted the stick from one hand to another.

The Devil roared, breathed fire, raised his claws.

“Second thing” said Nicholas. “The Corpse-Thief. Where in God’s name did Vittorio Tuzman get that contraption? It’s a pocket atomic bomb!”

“Yeah,” Kleist exhaled slowly. “We took a look at Mr. Tuzman. As a Shadow, he has an extensive file. Officially, he worked in security for one of the drug companies. There are currently no conditions to conduct a proper investigation, but it seems that Dr. Vassone’s former partner was an intermediary between the black market and a group of corrupt officers, selling military nano on the outside. The police found incriminating evidence in the clinic where Vassone wanted to have herself remodeled. JAG took it over, but they didn’t have time to get very far. The Corpse-Thief... That’s what he called it, huh? The Corpse-Thief is still a prototype, from what I understand, it was created in the Bridge as part of one of the military medicine projects; maybe a hundred copies, no more. It’s nothing as groundbreaking as it may seem, in fact the only difference is the speed of crystallization of the implant, hence the invasive method, straight to the brain, to speed it up as much as possible. It wasn’t intended for the purposes which you used it for; I’ve read the Bridge reports. It was one of the offshoots of the Schatz memorandum, a reaction to the anticipated Monad Wars. It was a way to invade areas covered by hostile monads. It was assumed that only ”human enemy material” would be used for this purpose, because every person, even if pre-edited, under a hostile monad would end up with a ground-up mind anyway. Hence the adaptation to field conditions and the involuntary intrusion. They didn’t go any further with it, because legal problems arose, again too many signed conventions; in the meantime Mr. Tuzman got his hands on a few copies. For organized crime, the thing is undoubtedly of great value, it’s easy to imagine ways to use it profitably. Worse, because it’s not known how much of it he’s already sold. New laws will have to be passed again. But that’s not my thing.”

“The process is probably reversible, isn’t it? Because since it’s basically the same nano, and I know that Toulouse 12 can flush out Toulouse 10...”

“Yes, you can remove the neurostructures of the Corpse-Thief once they’ve been established. Except... Hmm, you’d better see it with your own eyes.”

She stood up from behind her desk. A door opened in the wall behind her, a woolly brightness burst forth, the Devil covered his eyes with his hand. The general nodded to Hunt. When he approached, she took his hand. She was shorter, slim, petite—a different form of behavior was required: Nicholas bowed,

squeezed her arm, and it was he who led Iris, first crossing the threshold of the cave of light.

The stadium floodlights were shining straight into their eyes. Hunt, in his gothic MUI, was still somehow tolerating it, but Kleist had to fire up the appropriate macro—he knew she had, and yet he had not noticed the movement. A sixth finger? He asked her.

”A sixth finger is the most modest default,” she replied, looking around the green pitch. ”The human brain is open to many more connections than it actually actively uses. Of course, you can’t train it, you can’t grow new neural trees by willpower—but the implant can prosthesise them. Finger? Hand! Whole body! They’re there, let’s go.” She pulled him toward the end of the pitch, toward the goal posts.

”So what have you developed?”

She smiled mysteriously.

He smiled back.

”Tail? Wings? Twin sister? Queen mother?”

”Look, it’s them.”

They sat and lay on the grass in an area of, at first glance, a hundred square meters; those in the middle were lying. After a moment he noticed the next regularities: they were arranged in three concentric circles; those on the outside sat with their backs to the inside; those in the center looked the worst. The Devil counted: forty-seven. Hunt watched in silence, quickly fingering the next vision spells. He recognized the muscular pheno-asian and, seeing his empty hands, instinctively performed a Mood Editor reset mudra—but there was no falsehood in the image, Marina was dying a deck below. Marina, Marina. He immediately fell two stories toward hell. The Devil snorted hot sulfur. Nicholas, who always had to get it out somehow, hit him on the back with his stick.

Kleist looked back at Hunt. ”What...?”

”There are no others. That’s how many survived. That is, not counting the seriously injured. Why here?” Kleist stepped between the seated ones, leading Hunt in a roundabout way through the group of silent, motionless men and

women. A ghost walk. If he loosened the MUI a little, he could probably even run his hand through their bodies. "Why together? See."

They stopped in the middle. Kleist turned toward the dark opening of the tunnel. For a moment nothing happened; he waited patiently. The shadows from the floodlights, sharpened and deepened by the law of Necropolis, lay in long avenues of horizontal darkness, in ghastly contrast to the brightly juicy grass. The gigantic stands were empty, but the ingenious MUI had populated them with thousands of shadow people. When Nicholas raised his head, instead of stars, instead of advertisements —he saw a smooth oval blank-darkness, tightly closing the stadium bowl from above: the local network cameras did not reach there, did not encompass the sky. In the City of Death, he hummed to himself, thoughts of infinity are forbidden; in the City of Death we crawl with our eyes to the ground, hope reaching no further than the next fearful step. The grammar of the future tense and conditionals are forbidden. It is difficult to see clocks, calendars. We cultivate the art of unthinking optimism. In Gothic letters above the gate: IT'S BETTER.

He sat up, looked out the porthole. The phosphorescent crests of waves, now much higher, marked the ripples on the element's body. He leaned out to draw in the sea air. She will live, she will live, she will live; don't let your innate pessimism oppress you, Nicholas, trust Bronstein. She will live.

The soldiers ran out of the tunnel. Three; then two more. They ran so close together —they had probably already been Kaesteped. Light combat gear; but the weapons were shouldered.

As soon as they appeared, the Animal rose from the pitch. Only in movement did it show its true nature —for in movement it was a unity, a single mind, written out into forty-seven organic terminals: only in action was there intention. Surprised, Hunt looked around, not seeing much, because now his former AGENTS were standing to a man. Nicholas drew a figure of air and rose to six or seven meters. From here he already perceived the Animal as the Animal: a superorganism, turning its attention to them as the five soldiers moved. No delays, no short-circuits in the links, subinstinctive synchronization.

"Do you see now?" Kleist asked, having joined him at a height. "These are all monkeys, of course; that's what you took. Zero higher mental functions. When you lost contact with them, the program's supervision ended. All that remained were their corpse-bearing implants and the noise on their neurons. That's how

something like this evolved. We don't separate them, because now, in a group, they show at least some consciousness, self-preservation instinct, intelligence; as a group. Whereas alone, they are simply monkeys."

"I don't understand. Since some kind of managerial program has already developed in their implants..."

"But that's the point, nothing of the sort has happened! After all, we copied the contents of the implants of those seriously injured whom we had to put in hospitals, and there was nothing of the sort there. Balance exists only in the network, homeostasis only in the system —because not in its solitary element."

"Did you give them Kaestep?"

"Yes. But that doesn't matter: the consciousness of this entity is constituted at the level of the Corpse-Thief, not the minds."

"Did you flush them with Toulouse 12?"

"Why? So they'd go back to being apes?"

"So what are you going to do with them?"

"We don't know yet. We're keeping them, here because it's a large, enclosed space and has tight A-V coverage. We'll have to contact their juridictors... Actually, it's not our problem."

"What, maybe mine?"

"You didn't enslave them."

So who? As usual: nobody. December. Who released December? But again: which December? The first one, narrowly profiled toward Asians? Or the last one, open to the genome of all *Homo sapiens*? You won't figure it out. There is only a trend; there are only victims.

He jumped up from the bunk, ran from wall to wall and back. The Devil watched with understanding.

"How?" Hunt growled.

"They count, sir."

The US counteroffensive had not yet balanced out, Bronstein was still (I mean —when exactly?) searching through his futurmemory. At least it's a good thing that the first part of the script froze —because I can no longer see myself on the cushions of the Sneaky Fucker's Faraday office, I don't receive the psychomemes of that environment: the hookah in the hacker's mouth, the grass in the garden under the children's feet, the wind in his wife's hair... But at the same time, it would mean making all the other events linked to this path, although seemingly independent, more real. I wouldn't have been reduced to a pre-ghostly state, I wouldn't have regained my hand, the bullets that tore through Marina's body and the bionano in her cells wouldn't have been forgotten, Chigieza's plan wouldn't have been reversed... Amen.

He kicked the chair.

"What's wrong with you again?" Imelda huffed.

He put it down (instead of waiting for MUI to reset the scenery), sat down, took a breath; but calm didn't come.

"Which god is that?" he mumbled. "The fifth one, I think."

"Hmm?"

Revenge. Blind anger. An overwhelming desire to settle scores of injustices.

"I once met this tall pheno-metis at your skyhouse, a year and a half ago, what was it, some cocktail party, do you remember; someone whispered to me that he was one of the real owners of Intel/Motorola."

"Van Dernomme. Yes. I think he even went to a meeting of Gaspar's campaign committee once."

"Did he sponsor him?"

She shrugged.

"Get me his number, if you will," he asked. "He gave you high priority, I think."

She blinded herself exclusively, stood still for a moment. Then she reached out with her left hand, caught a falling star and threw it at Nicholas. He took it into his body.

The Devil automatically opened the connection. Van Dernomme's secretarial program rang. He and Lucifer chatted for a moment, without result —clearly van Dernomme had something else on his mind at the moment. Maybe a monad, Hunt thought sarcastically. He gave the Devil the parameters of the dialogue and set up a repeating loop —eventually van Dernomme would answer.

In the meantime, he uploaded the seventeenth MindMaster save. He closed his eyes. Aesthetic matrices —Schatz —Schatz-prophet in "Santuccio" embracing the night New York with a gesture —a psychomeme computer —reflections... He already had on the tip of his tongue, at the reach of a thought, at one association. The dream of the inventor of the Efes! Yes! Yes!

He pressed his temple against the cold iron. Van Dernomme would be useful, after all, he had to get a loan from somewhere —but now a new opportunity appeared: an independent, long-term project.

A slight psychophysiological discomfort, when the manager could not keep up with masking the vibrations of the labyrinth: it was *Curtwaiter* that began to rock harder. Nicholas repeated Ariel's runes, folded his wings and rose a kilometer, ten, one hundred, one thousand, thirty-five thousand upwards. From geostationary, he looked at the cloud shapes, the atmospheric fronts, the current projections indicated by the Devil. "A storm is coming, sir." Hunt nodded mechanically. The view stirred in him shallow associations. A high perch, yes. I'd better crawl in and sleep. The witch, Alabaster...

He got up from the bunk again, stretched his legs. The Devil was polishing the wall. "There you go, sir," he said, turning around. "There are the first approximations." "Well, show me, show me."

Of course, what he showed were visualizations of the ent analyses of those calculations, simplified to boot. Lucifer had by now become well acquainted with the height of Nicholas's infoeconomic knowledge. That's why he told Hunt each graph in detail, starting with the primary concepts. The ranges were still narrowing. While the Devil was talking, the predictions were being updated; the curves embossed from the wall trembled slightly, slower and slower, weaker and weaker, dying snakes. After all, it wasn't actual stock quotes that Nicholas was seeing here, not final balance sheets —but extrapolations of trends stretched along the time axis, the first steps of which WINNIE-THE-POOH's EDC cousins had finally managed to recognize the still boiling chaos of IEW and arrange into logical sequences; and these first steps could have been some cent transactions at

provincial brokerage nodes. The multi-valued compositions of trends projected possible future states of the market. The extreme of the probability function moved through this n-dimensional matrix as successive data from all over the world cut off the "false" fruits of the gene algorithms. Thus, a different set of tomorrow's economic states turned out to be the most probable; but the differences between successive prediction updates diminished and the picture froze. The ranges of US economic indicators extracted from this set were carved in the rough metal of the *Curtwaiter's* bulkhead by the Devil.

"Bronstein, you son of a bitch," Hunt whispered admiringly.

Bronstein did not answer again; or perhaps he simply did not remember the moment.

Hunt was full of admiration for the suicidal savage, because everything indicated that the counteroffensive had indeed succeeded; America had crawled—or rather would crawl—out of the collapse of the sudden Monadic Wars along a path of fortunate coincidences. Prayer, secretly released by Corps agents on the entire Earth, on all owners of legal and pirate clones of Toulouse 10, cleverly profiled by Kleist's staff to the greatest detriment of the new IEW powers and the greatest profits of the States—brought/will bring them victory. In addition, the Kaestep epidemic starting simultaneously from the foci in America gave the USA a head start of several dozen hours before the rest of the world, still heavily suppressed by thought. The curve of the expected useful life of Prayer collapsed after a week: after that time, the matter will come to light and Toulouse 12 will take over the baton. But also by that moment all private investors and stock exchange bandits of the world—those who did not go wild—guided by premonitions, night terrors, quick associations, unconsciously building seemingly neutral trends with their transactions—will crush the Transvaal, Hong Kong and Israel.

Hunt had the Devil call up the prediction curves of the stocks he was most heavily invested in, but which he had not abandoned in time due to blind stubbornness. Almost all of them rebounded/will rebound steeply, setting new records. In the pre-Economic Wars era, the stock market would very easily jump from bearish to bullish attractor, these were classic self-reinforcing trends of "bargain buying of undervalued securities" from the first level of the game; by the time they stopped, securities were usually already significantly overvalued and the rush to take profits began. Expert programs were also used to catch

such local lows and highs of prices early. Hunt was grateful to General Kleist for letting him drink from the EDC information well —such analyses were a tip from the gods, especially in the current situation. If only he could mobilize enough capital now...he straightened up as a hot shiver ran through him. A billionaire. Yes.

Maybe that was Bronstein's answer?

"He won."

Nicholas looked around. Marina was sitting in a plastic chair by the door, hunched over, her elbows on her knees. When he wasn't looking, she walked around in a dry simulation; when he looked, lowered his head, then she didn't exist.

"We won."

"Yes," he nodded.

He glanced at the bas-relief of Lucifer, but the stillness and unnaturally quiet voice of Marina worried him more and more —he approached, crouched in front of her, took her face in his hands, lifted her, looked into her eyes. Glassy with tears.

"What?" he whispered.

Rhythmically she clenched and unclenched her fists.

"I feel like..."

"Hmm?"

"I'm leaking."

He kissed her, lightly, the lightest, just the touch of his lips, the brush of his breath on warm skin. She blinked to look him clearly in the eye. He took her lip between his lips, moved his tongue, sucked it between his teeth, bit lightly. She breathed faster and faster. He exchanged her blood in his saliva, the sweetly nauseating elixir of life.

She squeezed his shoulders.

“Nicholas...”

“Shh. You’re alive. They’ll reverse this. I know it’s coming down more and more. It’s better. It’s better.”

She dug her nails into his biceps.

He pulled her head back again. She slid off the chair into his arms, he rolled onto his back. She fell with all her weight onto his chest, black polysilk on milky cotton. Hot breath burned his cheek, she grabbed his rough mustache with her white teeth, her forehead pressed hard against his, barely two inches between their black pupils, now he blinked as her tears fell into his eyes. She pressed him to the cold floor. He buried his left hand in her white hair, his right flowed under the polysilk, he squeezed her nipple, ran his nails over her ribs, slipped his fingers between her thighs, a path of moisture.

“Nicholas...”

“Shh.”

“Nicholas!”

A scream tore her in two. For a second she still held her form, he still hugged the woman; then she turned into angular blackness, the projection jumped all scales, heat burst at Hunt, soft blows fell on him, rough textures scraped his skin, a cacophony of sounds from the entire audible spectrum pierced his ears, a wave of sharp smells and tastes pierced his sinuses —he rolled onto his stomach, vomited.

The Devil lifted him from his knees.

”Bronstein!!!” Hunt screamed in trembling.

He staggered out of the cabin. Lucifer showed the way to the disoriented man. Stairs, corridor, stairs, bulkhead, airlock, checkpoint, let me through —he fell into the medical compartment. They were just draining the last fluids from the depressurized chamber. The blue flesh was starting to dry.

The Devil wiped the vomit from his beard.

SINCE Father Perez, as a Jesuit, did not have an implant, the meeting had to take place in the monastery's conference room, which was the only one with full A-V network coverage; and Father Perez had put on VR glasses for the occasion. Only the three of them were present: the Jesuit, Hunt, van Dernomme. It was part of the legal exclusion they had agreed to that excluded jurdictors and corporate lawyers from the negotiations. The agreement they had signed under Father Perez's watchful eye—with OVR pens, on OVR paper—was only a page and a half long and contained no complicated legal terms. The Jesuit, as certifier, had also signed, then copied the object onto the monastery's disconnected crystals. They checked the file against their copies and established a triple crypto key. Then Father Perez took off his glasses, leaving them alone.

"I don't know. Big. Very big. We're talking about an essential component in the technology of something like the new Star Wars."

Hunt poured himself a glass of Scotch. Van Dernomme stroked the vault of his skull thoughtfully (he was bald).

"Are you sure they won't just shrug off the patents and hide behind national security? Countries are practicing industrial espionage on a grand scale."

"Are you sure?" Hunt replied. "Too big, it'll soon be a big industry."

Van Dernomme was silent, preoccupied.

Nicholas drained his glass and decided to finally close the deal, not wait for the billionaire to feel better.

"Zweine GmbH, heir to GenSym," he said. "A company under Swiss law. Public. Open structures, less than half a gig. One third of the shares in the offer; and they fell through the Depression along with the others. The rest are weakly rooted; or so I was assured. This patent is a technology for artificially cultivating analogues of human fetal brain neurostructures. The aftermath of GenSym's Fountain of Youth; for now it's lying in Zweine together with the rest of GenSym's bankruptcy estate under liabilities. But they can find out at any moment, it's already floating in the noosphere. So if you simply come up with a specific offer, even through some blind company, their expert programs will definitely tell them to wait it out and check the trend."

"But," van Dernomme shook his head "half a gig...! At a time like this! I'd

have to get off some papers quickly, I'll lose a fortune."

"You'll earn more. You have no choice, you have to buy the whole of Zweine."

Van DERNOMME continued to grimace. But Nicholas already knew that this was —conscious? unconscious? —a pose. The billionaire simply did business this way; in a phlegmatic mode. Or maybe he edited himself that way.

Hunt approached the cross, traced the feet of Christ with his right thumb, and looked at the bloody face. The Devil snorted, disgusted.

"This right to non-exclusivity that you forced on me..." van DERNOMME spoke from behind them. "Let's say I sell you this patent for a dollar and give you a hundred mega monthly credit. What will you do in a month? I don't understand. You want to enter the Pentagon's tenders as a subcontractor? That makes no sense. You agreed to a non-resale clause, so you won't even ruin my market. Are you going to develop your own Star Wars? For a hundred mega? In a month? Mr. Hunt!"

"I don't understand what it is that concerns you. A contract is a contract. I gave you information that will earn you giga and giga. You will give me the right to use the patent and credit. That's it."

Nicholas turned away from the cross. The pheno-mulatto was still shaking his head, the lamplight reflecting off his hairless skin in perfect reflections. His transmission was going through two anonymizing servers, he could be anywhere on Earth. The security signal was taking a roundabout route: Nicholas caught a distinct delay in the oligarch's words and gestures once or twice.

"Mr. Hunt!" van DERNOMME repeated. "You know very well that I know who you are. You haven't left the news yet as public enemy number one this season. Traitor; not traitor; now you come and sell confidential information. You say you no longer work for the government; that it's your dowry. Okay, I understand, it's customary, we all realize that these promises not to use knowledge and to work in another industry are pure comedy, no government would make its employees co-owners. But how can I verify that you are no longer working for the EDC? What? Even if you sincerely believe it yourself. How? It's impossible. I have to be careful, otherwise I'll be manipulated as a party to an international conflict. What you're doing to me here... this is a classic method of recruiting a double agent performer."

Nicholas just smiled under his mustache, tapping his thigh with his cane.

“But you’ll buy Zweine anyway,” he finally whispered. “Right?”

Van Dernomme slowly smiled back.

“I’ve been buying it for five minutes.”

Hunt nodded to the Devil. Lucifer jumped, tore off the crucifix, struck the wall with his horns. Rubble fell. Coughing from the raised dust, Nicholas went through the breach. The lights in the first-class compartment were dim, most of the passengers were asleep, the steady hum of the plane’s engines had an almost hypnotic effect. The Devil pointed to a row with a fragment of a cross, Nicholas approached, tapped Anselm on the shoulder with his cane. Preslawny tilted his head, glanced at his hand and moved his lips. Bang! Gold dripped from the walls covered with plant ornaments, the flames of candles set in heavy candlesticks flickered, a nightingale swinging from the ceiling in a silver cage sang high trills. The rose window looking out onto the monolithic night reflected the side of the armchair carved with birds and fantastic creatures of the air, adjacent to the one Preslawny was sitting in. All the seats around Anselm were empty—now the planes carried only a fifth of the number of passengers they had been designed for. Stewardesses were distributing extra Kaestep inhalers; stewardesses (and stewards—in the women’s compartments) made up one hundred percent of the jet’s crew: after the Plague, even the symbolic supervision of human pilots over the control computers had been deemed too risky; cockpits were sealed by commission at airports. Preslawny was flying to New Mexico, to Krasnov’s Four Dry Springs Hacienda, where Ronald Schatz had called him. The Airbus was running economy at twenty thousand feet, pursued by cold ocean fronts.

Anselm, all lace, jabots, pearls, and satin, his hair coiffed, his fingers ringed, greeted Nicholas with a firm handshake. They knew each other too well, for too long; so no empty condolences, no rituals of sympathy between them now. Hunt started straight away about business.

“I want you to tell them off. You’ll come to me. Vice president. I’m starting a company. Five percent of shares plus options, earnings four times higher. What do you say?”

“Wait, I’ll jump to full OVR.” Preslawny fired up the macro; from now on, although he still moved his lips, it was already a movement imposed by the MUI,

Hunt knew that in RL Anselm did not make a sound, no one heard anything. The data stream, formatted and compiled according to the CIOT protocol, and then reduced to pure noise by two-level crypto interlocutors, circulated in a closed circuit between Hunt's Toulouse, the star of *Curtwaiter*, the star of Airbus and Preslawny's Toulouse. "Okay. What kind of company is this supposed to be?"

"You have to go in blind."

"Ouch."

"Unfortunately."

"How slippery?"

"I'm registering with the Free Caucasus."

"Ah, so you're getting into a monadic business."

"Let's say."

"Don't spin it, don't spin it; if it was just about taxes, you'd run away to the Cartel. You expect lawsuits. You commercialize the Program, who would have thought... What will the ownership structure be?"

"Complete entrapment. Everything in our hands, zero on parquets. We invest from dividends. No exclusive contracts. Besides, after a year or two, people will be replaced, and we will fade into the background. So are you in or not?"

"What capital do you have?"

"Two hundred or three hundred mega."

"Do you have three hundred million?! Where from...?"

"I will have it. For now, I have a hundred in credit monthly and a tip for Fast London in the IEW."

"What did they secure this credit on, huh?"

"On my TP rights, DNAM and body; although it is symbolic, because in reality it is payment for information."

I won't even ask what kind." Preslawny shook his head. "But in your old

age you will become a Trevelyanist... You shot me.”

“Are you in or not?”

Anselm twirled the ring around his thumb.

“You realize that this will prevent me from seeing Iris any longer.”

“Only in RL. In OVR, under heavy crypto, you can live together twenty-four hours a day, you can afford a hard link, sub-quarter-second latency; and there’s no way anyone will find out.”

“But that’s just OVR.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Can I talk to her now?”

“No. Are you in? Anselm, for fuck’s sake...!”

“I’m in. Talk.”

Hunt signaled Lucifer. The manager sent an application to the Grozny co-urthouse for the registration of Illuminatia Ltd., with Anselm Preslawny as chairman of the board and executive vice president.

“Well, that’s it. Nicholas leaned back, sprawled comfortably in a plush crimson armchair, his cane between his knees, his hands on the handle.” Remember Vince Li’s talk at the Bunker conference? Psychomeme computer...?

“Oh, that. What, are we investing in memoinformatics?”

“No. Listen, in a few dozen hours, we’ll have a patent for neuromatrices. You’ll quickly buy the best people from the Bridge; they’ll replace them easily, but we’ll have to solve the problem of bioware-hardware connections and create the appropriate software, and specialists are essential for that. One-sided software: that is, we won’t burn anything in our minds, we’ll only read it. We’ll start growing these matrices in earnest, we’ll launch the first circuits right away from Baikonur, I’ve been asking about the prices. The second is cosmic and above the ecliptic. You don’t need much there: an armored container, about a liter in volume, thickly insulated, and a strong transmitter. I’m still wondering about the type of power supply, because radioactive isotopes are out of the question,

and at such a distance from the Sun... Anyway... The transmissions of every weakest flash on the matrices go to us uninterrupted, under heavy crypto. We organize and analyze it; this is where specialist software is needed.”

“Right now, this looks like another attempt at Contact. Where’s the profit?”

Hunt smiled maliciously.

“Remember how the futuroscope was invented?”

Anselm opened his mouth —and didn’t close it again. He stared at Hunt in silent horror.

Nicholas nodded.

“Yes, yes, my dear. We’ll drain the mind of knowledge. Whatever anyone has ever invented; in this universe and previous ones; the more useful, the more often used, the more thoroughly thought through, therefore the clearer in thought. An aqueduct of information. Straight from the source. Recipes for miracles and impossibilities. Civilizations billions of years old. Since *Psychosoic universii* are going to make money anyway —at least let’s make money from it. The ultimate know-how. Only from our hands, a delivery every week, a Nobel every month.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes, yes.”

Anselm shook himself. He conjured a beer, drank it quickly. He kept blinking.

When he turned to Nicholas a minute later, he was already smiling broadly.

”Let me shake the monster’s hand.”

Hunt offered him his right hand, feigning aristocratic haughtiness.

Anselm laughed loudly.

”Shoot yourself, just in case,” Nicholas advised him. ”Why should it spread.”

Preslawny inhaled three long bursts of Kaestep into his lungs.

”We need the best patent lawyers in the world,” he said, putting the device away.

"Yeah. That's the key issue, and intellectual potential will be the deciding factor, so we'll have to take them into partnership; not a controlling stake, but some kind of partnership is inevitable. I've already given the headhunters a profile, they're screening law firms all over the world, because we need specialists in every region."

"You've made a great start, I'll give you that. Hmm... but when you think about it... It won't be that easy. A risky undertaking, to say the least."

"I know. This software for handling aesthetic neuromatrices, methods of converting exomemetic packages —that will be the hardest. That's why it's so important that we're the first, that we take the best experts and be the first..."

"No-no-no, I meant something else. How can I say... remember when they turned Ronald off at the conference? 'A Metaphysical Catch-22'. Remember?"

"Yes. What's your point?"

"Nicholas... how easy was it for you to come up with this mind drain idea?"

Five, ten, fifteen breaths, and they were still silent; their gazes frozen in a freeze frame —empty, devoid of thought and emotion. Management programs, with the help of facial editors, preventively erased all expression from their faces, eyes. The two of them could consider themselves friends, but the Devils in their implants knew better.

"Even if you're right," said Hunt slowly "even if... can't we still make money on this?"

Preslawny hesitated. He shrugged.

"You'd better stay on the *Curtwaiter* for a while longer. Or buy some automatic yacht and sail to the middle of the Pacific. They won't notice, after the Plague, a lot of people do that. Why do you have to reinforce the trend."

"I advise you to do the same."

"Yes. I won't set foot in the Hacienda, that's for sure."

"But don't run away just yet. Hunt shifted his cane from hand to hand, raised his gaze above the back of the chair in front of him, took a deep breath. He could hear the Devil's growing, rasping growls, the beating of hooves on the

red-carpeted floor, getting faster and faster.”

“I’d like to ask you a favor. You know sneakerheads, the more shady ones, you have connections to blind contractors, you have experience, you worked six years in the Agency’s operations department. I know it will be very expensive, considering the goals, but if this deal with the mind drain works out, getting the right amount won’t be a problem for me.”

“Nicholas...,” Anselm began on a low note.

Hunt raised his hand.

“Please.”

Preslawny fell silent.

“Chigueza and the rest of the decision-makers from Langolian” said Hunt. “Track them down. Kill them. Let them suffer first. Them, their families, their friends. Long. So that they know. Kill them. Anselm. Only that.”

Preslawny looked out through the crystal rosette at the starry night, his face reflected in the colored window —dead, motionless; in reality or in projection, you won’t find out.

“It won’t change anything, you know,” he said quietly. “It won’t bring her back to life or anything. Besides, it’s dangerous. Why? Wait, it’ll pass. Why immediately so...”

“Because I hate them.”

“But —the families...”

“Let them suffer.”

“Jesus, Nicholas, come to your senses, you want me to order the murder of innocents...”

“Just like they ordered it. This is revenge, Anselm. Maybe you won’t understand, you definitely won’t, but...” Hunt suddenly grabbed Preslawny by the forearm, turned him toward himself, leaned toward him. He was looking him straight in the eye now with the intensity of a hungry predator, his face twisted in a grimace of painful lust, his teeth bared; in reality or in projection. He was

passing the words to Anselm along with his breath burning his throat. "This is my revenge. You see. There is no law. There is no custom. There is no morality. There is no religion. There is only self-sustaining chaos; there are only individual people and what is between them. Please. Will you do it?"

"I will have nightmares about it for the rest of my life..."

"Will you do it or not?"

IN clay, in tar, in molasses. When he had to get up from the bunk —half a minute before he lifted his leg, lifted his torso, moved his body. A short, uncertain step, his foot scraping heavily on the bare, metal floor. Then he would grab the walls, the furniture, in oblivion with both hands; and even so he was thrown around helplessly, he lost his footing. Willpower and patience were enough to drag himself to the bathroom; then he had to stand for a long time, his back against the cold bulkhead, with his mouth pressed shut and his neck stiff, before he pulled himself back to the bunk. In OVR he was decisive, energetic, juggled millions, built empires, declared wars, angels of good and evil dug into his arms with long claws, in OVR he was the King of Necropolis, he had both hands, the right one even more powerful than the left, a white cravat gleamed on his black shirt, a ponytail pulled back his strong hair, the turns of a silver-forged staff scattered the surrounding shadows, in OVR he was Nicholas Hunt; in Real Life he had a broken spine.

Because of the storm he had to slam the porthole shut, steel surrounded him on all sides, there was not a crack, the smallest opening, nothing —a preserve of loneliness. The screaming phase lasted only a few minutes for him —now silence. Not even in sound; not like this. After all, the hull of the freighter creaked and roared, thrown up and down by the demons of the sea; after all, the hundredth echo of waves hitting the resonant steel thundered in its empty interior; Hunt was breathing and the blood was roaring in his ears. But —silence. But —darkness. Slowing down, a great burden on body and soul. Every muscle twitch and thought extinguished to zero. How to move, how to live...? In clay, in tar, in molasses. She had hair like the light of a stained glass window and eyes like the Arctic sky. That tilt of her head, that narrow half-smile —that's how she launched the macro of immortality, a small bug in the Lord's plan... Put your forehead against the cold steel, the fever will go away. Blumm, blummmrr, we're falling into another valley of the sea. He lies on this bunk like a corpse,

his body rocking helplessly to the rhythm of the waves. Only his right hand: thumb, index, ring finger up, finger down, fist.

Father was in the Chicago City Hospital, under heavy Kaestep and anesthesia pushing him into a dreamless sleep; but it wasn't the Team's work, they lied about the accident. Father simply became another victim of the Crowd. Both of his legs were broken. They identified him by DNAM, he hadn't regained consciousness yet.

The hospital, as a public facility, was densely covered in A-V. Hunt stood at the foot of the bed, rested his hands on the railing, leaned over; he looked. How many years had it been since he had last seen him? Live —about thirty, since the final separation from his mother, his father had left Poland then, returned to the USA. But then sometimes by videophone... Only then without the possibility of understanding, truth —only words and face, conscious and unconscious distortions. Now too, because both OVR and anesthesia... So it wouldn't touch his soul. But he hoped that the image itself, that all the visual associations connected with the sight of his father —that it would be enough to trigger old emotional macros, to open those ulcers of memory, to let the black pus flow. Because today, that was exactly what he needed: black, the hottest, stinking, sticky black, the one that had been planted in his head in his childhood, in infancy, still in the incubus, his mother and he, his father, not his father, the true King-Emperor of Necropolis, when he had raped her, in reality and in fantasy, when he had hated her, wished her suffering, when he had sobbed furiously, when he had dreamed. God, his dreams, I remember now —I screamed silently, biting my fists...

Black, black, black! He was already breathing deeper, leaning against the bed rail, drawing invisible miasmas into his lungs. Back to the world of iron constants, back to his childhood. It was all right. Yes. It was all right. Everything would return to its place. They would die, suffering. How stupid I had been, how naive! What an idiotic clinch, what an emotional loop with that Marina; and she wasn't even good in bed. He straightened, adjusted his cuffs. Pulse steady, slow now. He kissed his unconscious father; dry lips, dry skin. Black, black flooded everything.

Imelda was asleep in an armchair, in the corner of the bedroom opposite the bed with the delirious Gaspar Tito. Anselm was dozing in the cabin of an automatic CeeJet, chartered by Illuminatia Ltd. for a direct flight to Massachusetts.

The night wind was blowing damp leaves over Bronstein's grave.

"Sir."

He sat down at the desk, picked up the volume bound in human skin. You can't break old habits. He squeezed the Devil's pen between his fingers, already dipped in blood. He began to write; red stitches of small, round, precisely modeled letters flowed from his hand. Who exactly are memoirs written for? Nor did he raise his head when the demons howled, deadly calm in the eye of the storm.

Now I will lie. My name is Nicholas Hunt.

Outside, the elements were raging.

July 1997-August 2000